

We need to talk about Alfred Deakin and his ideal of a White Australia

Open seminar on 2-330pm, 3 December 2020 to discuss pathways forward with Deakin University community. To stay informed sign-up here [AD Legacy: we need to talk](#).

How is Alfred Deakin remembered?

When Alfred Deakin is mentioned in the media or invoked by politicians he is often remembered as a progressive liberal, a founding father of the Australian federation, and a model for contemporary politicians to follow.

In a 2017 interview, [Leigh Sales](#) (Deakin University graduate) criticised then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull for moving to the right of his party and departing from the values that put him ‘in the small “l” liberal tradition of Alfred Deakin.’

More recently on July 7, 2020 Treasurer [Josh Frydenberg](#) invoked Alfred Deakin in calling for national unity in response to the second wave of COVID-19 in Victoria. Frydenberg quotes an 1898 speech from Alfred Deakin “it will be a union that will endure” providing “perpetual security for the peace, freedom and progress of the people of Australia”.

These appeals to Alfred Deakin’s liberalism ignore his racism. To take the example of unity, Alfred Deakin understood the security and unity of Australia as dependent on a racially and linguistically homogenous society. In his own words, “[unity of Australia is nothing if it does not imply a united race](#)”.

Alfred Deakin’s racism and his central role in promoting and designing the White Australia Policy is commonly known among historians. Yet this aspect of Alfred Deakin’s legacy is often silenced, misremembered or actively forgotten at Deakin University and elsewhere.

Arguably, his most infamous statement regarding race is the prediction that,

In another century the probability is that Australia will be a White Continent with not a black or even dark skin among its inhabitants. The Aboriginal race has died out in the South and is dying fast in the North and West even where most gently treated. Other races are to be excluded by legislation if they are tinted to any degree. The yellow, the brown, and the copper-coloured are to be forbidden to land anywhere.

From our experience, when staff and students at Deakin University hear this quote and the many others like it for the first time they are shocked. Some ask why a university would be named after someone whose values are so incompatible with those embodied in the University today.

How should Alfred Deakin be remembered?

A common defence of Alfred Deakin is that he was simply a man of his times. But this defence does not stand-up to scrutiny.

First, not everyone shared Alfred Deakin's views on race and its political application. It may be unrealistic to have expected Alfred Deakin to listen to objections made by the peoples who were subject to his racist legislation, but there were critics of his position inside and outside of parliament, as well as critics in London. Even though Alfred Deakin's racism enjoyed wide support it was not a unanimously held view.

Second, Alfred Deakin's racism was exceptional for the way it permeated and shaped his progressive liberalism. Alfred Deakin was greatly influenced by [Charles Pearson](#) and his theory of 'the white man under siege' by black and Asian races. Pearson also put forward the idea that Indigenous peoples were dying out, which is reflected in the quote above. Alfred Deakin incorporated Pearson's theories on race into his political liberalism. The free and democratic life that he promoted was dependent on a White and homogenous race that spoke one language. This racism materially shaped a nation.

The point is that Alfred Deakin's racism was not something he merely absorbed from a racist culture he inhabited, but it was actively thought-out and structured his politics.

Questions surrounding the legacy of Alfred Deakin will not go away. Global movements such as Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall, as well as local anti-racist movements, have encouraged Australians to question the legacies and histories of the people memorialised with statues, buildings, scholarships, awards, and institutions.

How is Alfred Deakin remembered at Deakin University?

Deakin University arguably contributes to the misremembering of Alfred Deakin's legacy.

First, the [University's biographies](#) of Alfred Deakin are silent when it comes to his racism and role in designing and promoting the White Australia Policy.

Second, the University memorialises this incomplete understanding of Alfred Deakin through scholarships, professorships, awards, libraries, and institutes named after him. This naming is palpably out of alignment with present-day values for a cosmopolitan, inclusive university, and especially one with proud connections to Asia. For example, the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation pursues robust projects focused on anti-racism and multiculturalism, a vision profoundly at odds with Deakin's ideas for who should be included in the nation state.

Third, art, murals, and merchandise using Alfred Deakin's image create an aesthetic that ignores the past. The large public murals also mark and shape physical spaces in which staff and students interact. This memorialisation of Alfred Deakin may seem innocuous, but it contributes to a public understanding of Alfred Deakin that is selective and through omission, dishonest.

How should Deakin University remember Alfred Deakin?

At the [2018 UNESCO Oration](#) hosted by Deakin University, Professor Marcia Langton began with the Alfred Deakin quote above that in "In another century the probability..." There was

embarrassed silence until Langton joked “you don’t have to change the name”, which was followed by relieved laughter. Perhaps changing the name is not required. Perhaps it is. But what is most definitely required is more than silence or embarrassed laughter.

As members of Deakin University, we have been asked by students, prospective students, peers, and the general public how Alfred Deakin’s legacy of racism is understood and remembered in an institution that bears his name. There is an assumption that there has been an open conversation about this problem.

Langton concluded her oration in saying:

Without meaningful constitutional recognition Australia remains trapped in Deakin’s idea of “Australia for the White Man.” This idea is deeply ingrained in Australian life and we see it played out in most encounters between government officials and Indigenous people. It underlies the life-threatening disadvantages we face.

Alfred Deakin’s idea of Australia for the White Man is not something that can be relegated to the past. As Langton and many other researchers and policymakers have pointed out, the long term legacy of the White Australia Policy and racial liberalism continues to adversely shape the lives of Indigenous peoples and those considered as ‘other’ to the white majority.

We are writing to initiate a conversation with the wider Deakin University community. This is a conversation about history, heritage, and racism that has already begun at many other institutions around the world and is beginning at Australian universities, such as Macquarie, La Trobe, and Griffith.

The University’s ‘Towards 2030’ draft strategic plan embraces bravery as a core value and claims for Deakin the status of “the most progressive university”. Embarking on an open process to come to terms with Alfred Deakin’s legacy would lend substance to these claims. It would also position Deakin as a leader in a set of national and international debates that show no signs of abating, and rather, are gathering pace.

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This document is the product of a series of conversations that took place between June – October 2020. It was initially drafted by Dr. Christopher Mayes to reflect those conversations and was subsequently re-drafted through collective feedback.