



A contemporary art project  
by Alison Alder

# one to eight

Australia's First  
Prime Ministers

'I never thought I would have become so fascinated by blokes from 1901 to 1929' artist Alison Alder says of the subjects of her Museum of Australian Democracy exhibition *OnetoEight: Australia's First Prime Ministers*. It was not the only surprise for Alder, a leading contemporary Australian artist and head of the ANU School of Art's Printmedia & Drawing Workshop, who created the prints during a 2016 Australian Prime Ministers Centre fellowship.

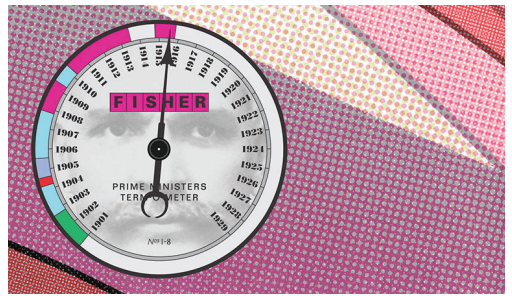
Alder's career is notable for its long and deep political engagement, from her early years as co-director of the Redback Graphix poster collective in Sydney and, later, to her sustained engagement with Indigenous Australians who figure centrally in her art. Political poster-making, and politically redolent works in general, are the very heart of Alder's art practice.

'That's what made it tricky' she says of *OnetoEight's* subjects, the first eight prime ministers of the newly federated Australia. 'I found I couldn't be partisan looking back. I started to see the nuances of the political situation at the time.'

As an artist, not a professional historian, Alder consciously resisted making fine-grained historical judgments about them. Instead she decided to respond to each one as a person, drawing on the print, cartoons and photographic images circulating during their active careers, along with their legislative legacy and its context.

This fresh reading of each prime minister was drawn on to devise the imagery seen in each of Alder's screenprinted posters. The lapel badges, commonly worn by politicians in the decades following federation, are Alder's vehicle for her take on the prime minister concerned.

The project changed Alder as a person, concretely influencing the way she looks at current politics. The printmaker who once analysed politics in black and white terms, and expressed trenchant positions with bold colours and striking images, now sees a bigger, subtler picture. 'I don't think you should look at things on a single issue basis,' she says in the



*Term-O-Meter*, single channel digital animation, duration 14.04 minutes 2017

wake of the project, a major departure from the polarised political poster-making of her early career. 'I think you need to look across a broad spectrum.'

In responding to the person rather than just the politician, in this exhibition Alder the artist gives pause to historians to think again about how much received wisdom there is in accounts of these first eight prime ministers.

Protectionist prime ministers Edmund Barton and Alfred Deakin are examples. Both were historically associated with the White Australia policy – anathema to contemporary Australian mores. Alder found them more complex than received wisdom would have us believe. Even the White Australia policy itself turned out to have more facets than she had appreciated, Alder discovering for example, that some right-wing groups opposed it because 'they wanted to maintain their labour (and so) they didn't want families to be deported from (for example) North Queensland'.

Alder juxtaposes the perceived evil of the White Australia policy with the granting by Barton – in her estimation a 'solid, stolid sort of character, calm and not flighty' – of female suffrage in Australia, a progressive near world first.

In contrast to the benign image of Barton she has chosen, the mad-eyed image of Deakin central to Alder's image of him, makes him look almost literally mad. Somewhat saintly by reputation, Alder had an almost visceral reaction to him as in her view 'selfish and not someone she 'would liked to have hung out with'. Acknowledging the worth of much of his legislative program, Deakin's devotion to

spiritualism drove her reaction to him: 'He was seriously, seriously into it, which I thought was pretty wacky for an intelligent person'. Thus the central 'wild eyed' Deakin image Alder chose hints at 'all those thoughts zinging in his head'.

Perhaps the biggest reversal of fortune in the show is Alder's poster of Reid, for whom she felt great compassion. She perceived him as the victim of vilification over his looks and girth when in fact he was a considerable orator capable of holding the attention of large crowds. 'I deliberately looked for an image that showed him in a more kindly light rather than the monocled, walrus-moustached image' handed down through history as formed by cartoonists and Reid's political enemies. The warmer image Alder gives us encourages curiosity about one of Australia's most overlooked prime ministers.

The Labor prime ministers Chris Watson and Andrew Fisher are portrayed in their handsome glory adorned with, in Watson's case, his signal achievement as the first (if brief) Labor head of government in the world, and in Fisher's case set against the glow of a then world-beating progressive legislative agenda. Alder's poster of Labor rat turned conservative prime minister Billy Hughes is as dubiously loud as was the man himself. Stanley Bruce, the first to serve as prime minister in Canberra rather than Melbourne, where the federal government met until Parliament House was built, is shown by Alder as four square. The sheep are a tip of the hat to Bruce's distinction of being the first conservative prime minister to ally with country-based MPs to form government.

Where are the women? 'The wives are really important as well,' Alder argues, pointing to examples like Andrew Fisher's wife Margaret, who took part in historic marches in London for female suffrage, the intelligent Jane Barton and stalwart Florence Reid. 'I don't think any of those men married shrinking violets,' she says. 'They were all strong women.' Though to a significant extent they have been forgotten, even more so than their husbands. Alder notes them in the wallpaper that forms the backdrop to the show which, poignantly, contains no image of Ada Watson who has almost



Left: No 002 Deakin, screenprint on tissue 2016  
Right: No 007 Hughes, screenprint on tissue 2016

completely been lost to time. (If you have one, Alder would like to know.)

Alder perceives today's politics characterised by frequent changes of prime minister and realignments of personnel and voting patterns once seemingly set in concrete, as having much in common with the early Federation era. The animation Alder has produced for *OnetoEight* portrays the changing political hues of individuals and their governments as the early years of the 20th century unfolded.

What's more, she sees related lessons for today's early 21st century leaders. Alder concluded that no matter from which side of politics a prime minister hailed, those 'who stood firm on their platforms actually did well'. She points to Labor prime minister Andrew Fisher and conservative prime minister Stanley Bruce as examples. 'I don't think you want dilly-dalliers,' she says. 'My take-home advice for the current crop would be to have a policy and stick to it.'

Image management is not new, she also found, in the images she immersed herself of these first eight prime ministers notable for their tightly managed curation. With no moving images to provide alternative views in the round, the photographs used in public communications by the politicians themselves were all voters had to go by. If not for the iconoclasm of the 'maverick cartoonists' of the time, says Alder, that is all voters would have seen – tightly managed indeed.

*Historian Dr. Chris Wallace is ARC DECRA Fellow at the School of History, ANU, and a member of the Canberra Press Gallery*

## Australia's First Prime Ministers

A contemporary art project by Alison Alder  
Curated by Glenn Barkley and Holly Williams



### About Alison Alder

Alison Alder is a visual artist whose work blurs the line between studio, community and political art practice. Her work has been included in several key exhibitions including *Making It New* at the MCA Australia and is held in many public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, MCA Australia, the Australian War Memorial, State galleries and the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. She has won several awards and grants including a Fellowship at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre, the Alice Prize, an AIATSIS Research Grant and an Australia Council Fellowship. Alison is currently Head of the ANU School of Art and Design's Printmedia & Drawing Workshop.

### Acknowledgements

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