

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RT. HON. R.G. MENZIES, AT OPENING OF ADOLPH BASSER LIBRARY, ACADEMY OF SCIENCE, CANBERRA, 26TH APRIL, 1962

Mr. President, Dr. Bassar, ladies and gentlemen:

I want to tell you at once that a great weight has fallen from my mind since I arrived here this afternoon. I was here this morning as a sort of soi-disant Fellow of the Academy, compassed about by the most formidable collection of scientists that Australia has ever seen. So I felt muted and a little depressed. But when I came in here this afternoon and saw so many people just as unscientific as I am, this took a weight off my shoulders.

Sir, I want to say, before I make a few remarks that may be relevant to the occasion, that I cannot tell you how I admire the international organisation which has been directed to this event. This afternoon I open formally - whatever that means - the Library and I was told in advance very kindly by my old friend Professor Cherry that this was to be directed to scientific history, or the history of science. Today, when I went into my office I opened up a communication from Harvard - of which I am, as you might say, a species of graduate - and it contained a Newsletter and, believe it or not, the subject of the Newsletter was "Reflections on the History of Science as an academic subject - An American view". That gave me an enhanced opinion of the skill with which these people organised their business.

Could I first of all say something about the man whose name we are honouring this afternoon, Adolph Bassar. So far as I can make out - I haven't pursued him impertinently - he wasn't born in Australia, but all I can say is that he has lived a long time in Australia and he has left his mark on Australia. He is one of those men who, having decided no doubt that it was time that he had a hobby, took up as a hobby giving money away! This is an admirable hobby. And give it away he does, in a magnificent and spacious, but always well-directed fashion. I want him to know that everybody here appreciates what he has done, and is doing, very greatly indeed.

The other thing that I want to say to you concerns the Library itself. There are those - and perhaps I have been among them in my time who think there is some rather deep cleavage between what we call scientific study in the strict sense, and the study of the humanities. It is very fascinating to me to find how the lines blur, and how, in the case of this Library you can bring the great business of history into conjunction with the great business of science. The study of history has always seemed to me to be one of the most important studies that a man can direct his mind to because an ignorance of history can so easily produce a stupid disaster; and to have it applied in the case of science seems to me to be a splendid illustration of its value - not only to science, but in other fields.

A knowledge of history seems to me to be of great moment for the conduct of public affairs; for the great conduct of business affairs for that matter. I speak subject to correction but wasn't it Henry Ford himself who, when on oath oddly enough, in some litigation in America made that immortal remark that "history is bunk", which satisfied my own mind that he understood mass production better than he understood history. How can we handle the great affairs of nations unless we know something about the past; unless we know what has happened; unless we reject that single fallacy that 'happy is the country that has no history'? I say unhappy is the country that has people charged with Government - the responsibility for it - who are not able to look back with history and to realise that there is not much that is new, that there are many demonstrations of error and that the business of wise men is to avoid errors that have been committed and confine themselves to their own instead of imitating other people's.

In science it seems to me, as a layman, to be quite clear that he who takes the end result of some piece of scientific investigation, accepts it, puts it into operation, is not a scientist in the full sense at all. The man who wants to conduct investigation into scientific principles can never, I believe, separate himself from what went before the last discovery. He cannot confine himself to the discovery itself. It is not sufficient to say 'what did he do?' It is very important to discover why he did it, and how he did it. So we have the great stream of scientific knowledge, a stream increasing at such a pace in modern times that to understand it fully we must occasionally go back along the streams and seek the fountainhead instead of just dividing up the little streams. Therefore the study of the history of science, facilities for that study, facilities for quiet reading and reflection, seem to me to be of the most tremendous importance.

There is just one other thing that I would like to say to you. A reference was made by Professor Cherry to sound recordings. I think we haven't caught up very much yet with the idea of using tape recordings and other means of recording people's voices and ideas. Nobody, for example, could properly understand the history, purpose, function of this Academy unless - as I didn't - I had had the forethought to put on my table a tape-recording machine every time Mark Oliphant came along with some improbable story, every time John Eccles came along with some improbable story - not necessarily the same story - or Leslie Martin, or even Sir John Cockcroft the Chancellor. What a wonderful thing it would be to have on record the voice itself, things that had been said which might, in fact, in some sense, influence the future course of events. In the same way I can imagine that if I were a man of scientific bent and were a student at a University and sat at the feet, if not of the prophet, at least of some equally eminent person, borrowing a little of his own lustre by having been near him, it would be a great inspiration to me to be able to listen, thereafter, to his voice describing something, discussing something, provoking a few ideas. Therefore I venture to hope that in this Library there will be some space reserved for such things as tape recordings.

We in Australia are disposed to be a cynical, sceptical people. You are respectable when you are dead. You may have a fair chance of being famous or forgotten if you have been dead long enough. But as for the current state of affairs, well what of it. I venture to say that in this Academy there are men and women whose voices, literally whose voices, would be listened to with profound interest by people here in 50 years' time, or in 100 years' time. That really is why I have only one doubt about the Basser Library and that is whether it will be big enough. Because as time goes on the material that it will accumulate will be larger and larger and indeed more and more significant.

But that we should be able to find established in this place a Library devoted to scientific history is, I think, a matter for congratulations. I am very well aware of what Tom Cherry says about duplication of libraries and I am all for rationalising these matters. I say that as one who has had quite a few libraries plucked out of him in the last few years. But at the same time I am bound to say to you that I think one of the many proofs of growing civilisation in our country is that whereas to find a Library in a University was, not so many years ago, rather a rarity, we now have quite a few - large, growing, comprehensive. In this is the very heart of the University structure.

Therefore Sir, Dr. Basser, in thanking you for what you have done about this matter I want to say quite frankly that I think your contribution, standing as it does in the same building as this Hall which commemorates the magnificent and imaginative generosity of Sir Ellerton Becker, that this Library will be something that you will always be proud to remember that you brought into existence by your thought and generosity. Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, I formally declare the Library open.