

SETTING OF THE FOUNDATION STONE  
OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY, CANBERRA

66/085

31st March 1966

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Holt :

As you have been told by Mr. Anthony, I shall shortly have the privilege of introducing to you the best known man in Australia. I shall be asking him then to perform a task for which I think he has had more practice than any other man I could name in the public life of this, or any other country; and those two facts alone - as I give them to you - indicate the significance of the occasion for us and of the part of leadership and wise guidance which Sir Robert has himself played in relation to the building behind us.

He is fortunate, I think he would agree, at least in this respect, that most people who lay a foundation stone have to go through a long and rather uncomfortable period of waiting as the weeds build up around it and the time marches on before there is much visible sign of achievement imposed upon the stone which has been laid.

But here we see a building well advanced along the road to completion and already signifying to us in its lines the distinction which Mr. Anthony has referred to so eloquently as he has addressed us in the course of his own speech.

I know that there are many people to whom thanks and tribute should be paid on an occasion such as this, and I shall mention them in a minute or so. But, Sir Robert who has had such a leading part to play in the development of this beautiful Australian capital which in every year that passes unfolds itself in greater beauty and distinction for the observer - he would be interested to know that not only is the National Library project quite obviously so well advanced but another great interest of his was advanced a stage further this week when I received from Sir Daryl Lindsay as Chairman of the Advisory Committee, the report on the proposed National Art Gallery for the National Capital.

Sir Robert had a large part to play in the decision to establish here a National Art Gallery and to set up the Committee which would do the preliminary thinking on that matter for us.

We all know, ladies and gentlemen, that a building such as we find behind us - or you, in front of you - does not just happen and my colleague the Minister for the Interior has told you something of the planning and toil which has gone to make it.

He has also paid proper tribute to those involved and I would like to add the thanks of the Government to him because he has had a very active part to play in the overall project; and to Mr. Overall (no pun intended by that previous reference) to Mr. Overall and to all those

associated with them in what clearly will be a notable and enduring addition in what is already a very handsome Capital City.

The building will allow the library to bring together for the first time in Australia a collection of more than a million volumes and its vast collections of maps, manuscripts, pictures and films, this will make it possible for these great resources to be put to their best use. The Government has appreciated the difficulty of providing a satisfactory service from the past and present widely separated temporary buildings and it is grateful to the staff of the National Library for their dedicated services in these circumstances.

I would like to add a word on what the building means to the Government and to the Nation. It marks the fulfilment of processes which began with the first Australian Prime Minister in 1901, and which have had the warm support of successive governments and parliaments since that time.

I mention the Parliament because, of course, the National Library grew out of the Parliamentary Library, and until separation of the two libraries was begun in 1961, the National Library was developed by the presiding officers of Parliament and the Parliamentary Librarians of the day. They were advised by successive Library Committees representing both Houses of the Parliament and all parties in the Parliament. I recall with pleasure I had the privilege of serving as a back-bench member of Parliament on the Library Committee in earlier years.

Special recognition is due to my Colleague, Senator the Hon. Sir Alister McMullin, President of the Senate who presided over the Library Committee from 1956-1961, this was during a period of great development and has smoothed the process of separation since.

The growth of the National Library has been further accelerated since its act of 1960 under the guidance of the Council of nine members with the National Librarian as their Executive Officer. The Government is grateful to these men and women of wide and varied experience from throughout Australia who have given their services freely in the national interest.

Their Chairman, Sir Archie Grenfell Price, well known to most of you present as a scholar; is recalled by me as a very valued parliamentary colleague during some of the years of War.

The National Library Act of 1960 was a recognition by the Government and Parliament that a strong National Library was essential to the research and inquiry needed to support Australia's unprecedented National growth. It will supplement what has been done by Government and others for universities and research workers generally. As Sir Robert said when introducing it, the Act did not create a new institution but would define the functions and role of an institution which would increasingly play a National role of the greatest importance similar to that of the great National Libraries in other countries.

It is perhaps significant that the countries which have shown the greatest development in this century are those with the greatest collections of Library material for research. United States is, of course, perhaps the most notable example to which our own National Library owes a great deal.

What should the Australian people expect of their National Library ?

It is the place where they should hope to find the most detailed information about their own country and the most important facts and opinions about other countries, and especially about those with which our future is likely to be closely linked. The National Library is assembling the records of the past, as well as those which will reflect current activities. For we cannot understand the present or plan for the future without a knowledge of the past. This is especially important where Australians in relation to themselves and in their growing association with other countries whose civilizations are so much older than our own. It is well to remember that these older civilizations include our Asian neighbours and therefore the Library is actively collecting material in many Asian languages as well as in English and European languages.

All this will be of great value to the Parliament, to the Departments of Government, to the Universities and to research and enquiry where ever it takes place. Through teleprinter links and inter-Library loans and new communications of the future, the resources of the Library will be available, as they should be, to Australian people everywhere.

And before I turn to my task of calling on Sir Robert may I on behalf of the Australian Government and indeed I believe I can say on behalf of the Australian people, pay a special tribute of thanks to Mr. Harold White who has given such distinguished service to the Library through so many years. He has become - if not a Canberra institution certainly in our eyes a Parliamentary institution in his own right - and I speak in warm terms of the gratitude which we Members of the Parliament, whether in Government or in Opposition, or whatever individual status may be, feel for Mr. Harold White and through him for the very able staff which assists him so pleasantly and agreeably in the service of the parliament as well.

Now I have earlier paid some quite inadequate tribute to the role of leadership and guidance exercised by Sir Robert Menzies through his record term of leadership as the Prime Minister of this country.

It is therefore, I am sure everyone will agree, entirely appropriate that the Foundation Stone of this building should be set by him and that he should be today looked to as the leading figure in a celebration which will be long remembered in Canberra and which will by virtue of the distinction of the building which it touches and the purposes which that building serves, mark as one of the more notable days in the development of Australia's National Capital.

I ask Sir Robert Menzies if he will lay the Foundation Stone of the National Library.