**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP**
**NATIONAL LIBRARY TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY DINNER**
**CANBERRA, 13 AUGUST 1993**

When I first arrived in Canberra as a young Opposition backbencher John Gorton was Prime Minister and this great library was well on the way to completion.

So it is very pleasing tonight to come here and see that we are all still standing.

Not that it was a surprise - the National Library and Sir John both have about them the same timeless, indestructible quality.

The building of the National Library spanned something of a sea change in our history. Sir Robert Menzies laid the foundation stone. Sir John Gorton opened it.

That was a considerable political shift.

For without intending the slightest disrespect to his illustrious predecessor, Sir John was a bit of a revelation to those of us who had really only known one Australian Prime Minister.

I know there are some who look back and see it as perfect peace - I saw it through different eyes, and so did many of my generation. We saw it by the mid-1960s in the doldrums.

With Sir John there was a difference in both style and substance.

It was Sir John, for example, who declared Commonwealth control over the coast to the high water mark and over coastal waterways and so preserved national responsibility for the environmental and resource issues which these areas presented.

In this and in other ways - like his support for an Australian film industry - Sir John demonstrated that the conservative parties were capable of change and vigour - and, dare I say, a rather more unqualified Australian demeanour.

But despite sporadic outbreaks of resistance from some of his successors, the change continued: the powers that he insisted should be the Commonwealth's have been invoked in the interests of the environment and the nation; the film industry has flourished magnificently; and the not unrelated question of Australia's independent identity has become a central element in a national debate which may yet yield an Australian republic by the end of the century.

So I hope Sir John sometimes allows himself the thought that he was a visionary.

With the luxury of hindsight, we begin to get a perspective on the nature of the battle in those years and in the twenty-five since.

In some respects it was a generational shift in values; yet I think the battles John Gorton fought were of a kind to be found throughout our history - between different concepts of Australia's nationhood and identity which emerged in the nineteenth century and have been alive ever since.

In time I expect someone will write the history of these last twenty-five years.

I know "From Gorton to Keating" has a funny sort of a ring about it, but under a different title it would be a rewarding project - there is that consistent theme of change attempted and change denied.

Change, let me say, has won a resounding victory and, for all the certainties which characterised the sixties, this is a much better Australia because change has won.

We have seen the remarkable growth of tolerant, creative cultural pluralism and all the riches this has brought Australia.

We have seen our attitude to the region in which we live change dramatically - and today we are seeing the pace of change accelerate.

The xenophobia has largely gone.

We have seen the culture of the workplace change fundamentally - from an assumption of opposing interests to one of shared interests.

The shape of the Australian economy has changed: for instance, we are seeing Australia become an exporter of manufactures - high tech goods as well as raw materials and agricultural products.

And we have seen Australians come to the understanding that these are things we must do if we are to secure our future.

That has probably been the most profound change of all - and our greatest achievement, our willingness to change, to recognise that the world is changing, and the way we do things and conceive of ourselves must change to accommodate it.

Yet far more than other comparable countries which have attempted the same kind of economic change, we have kept faith with our traditions of democracy and social justice.

Like other countries we have a severe unemployment problem.

But other countries do not have our health system. They do not have an Accord between unions and the government. They do not have the best record in the world on legislation to expand the status and rights of women. Few countries have such a secure social safety net.

We have considerable difficulties. There are all sorts of imperfections.

But at the end of a decade of the most profound economic change in our history, and at the end of a generation of equally profound cultural change, Australia remains among the very freest and fairest societies in the world.

That is not to be complacent - it is to recognise achievement and re-affirm our commitment to these principles.

So this last twenty-five years makes a great story.

And if someone does decide to write it there is one thing we can be sure of: we can be sure that the greater part of the research will be done here in the National Library.

For this is where the national story is contained. Like the Library of Congress and the British Library and the Bibliotheque Nationale, the National Library of Australia conserves the materials from which the story can be told - the story which will tell future generations who they are and how their country came to be.

Ultimately it will tell them whether this generation cared enough about Australia: whether they had enough wit to imagine Australia's future and enough courage to do what was necessary.

The National Library holds the materials by which we will be judged.

This audience scarcely needs me to tell them why we should celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the National Library - why it is one of Australia's greatest and most cherished institutions.

But as one who every day has his history written with an air of definitive authority in a dozen newspapers across the country, and served up on three commercial and two public television networks, and on countless radio stations where the public are also invited to join in the feeding frenzy - perhaps I can offer a politician's perspective on national stories.

I don't mean to offer the gratuitous advice that you shouldn't believe what you read in the newspapers: but it goes without saying that every one of those dozen newspapers may have, to a greater or lesser extent, a different account either of what was said or what was meant, and the television grabs can be equally as various as can the radio commentary.

Knowing that these are as much basic sources for historians as the writings of politicians and bureaucrats with necessarily defective and selective memories; knowing that the historian will have to read or speak to people who are absolute artists at covering their tracks: knowing this, and that most documents can be read in more than one way, and are deceptive if not meaningless without detailed knowledge of the context in which they are created; and knowing that every writer brings his or her own perspective and prejudice to the task - that like journalists they frequently have an axe to grind: knowing all this, I wonder how historians can presume to write the story at all.

That is the second thing we can be sure of when the story of the last twenty-five years is told - many people will say it is not the real story. They will say it is not a true story.

They will be right, of course. There will never be one true story of Australia and I think we should all be glad of that.

There are any number of people - I suppose some better qualified than others - who will tell you that the greatest work to be substantially researched in this Library is terribly flawed or even quite wrong.

But I don't think there are many people who would say that Manning Clark's six volume History of Australia does not contain fundamental truths about Australia, or that it has not greatly enriched our understanding of ourselves and entertained us. He made our lives more interesting by weaving them into a tapestry.

I'm sure that Manning Clark never intended his history to be the definitive story of Australia, any more than all those other works on Australian society are the last word on their subjects.

Clark's work was the product of one Australian's view, one Australian's passion for the place. I think it can be said that Manning Clark's great contribution was that he encouraged us to believe that our history was worth writing and knowing. In doing that he encouraged academics, teachers and students to think about the issues and the drama of the Australian experience - and encouraged all of us to think about what we could become.

When you look at the works which have been researched and written in this library, it is probably true to say that many of them were directly or indirectly inspired by Clark's labour.

Perhaps more than any other Australian writer, he elevated Australian history to the point where all of us could say that the story of Australia was part of the universal story - uniquely Australian, but at every stage connected to the world beyond.

I would not want to suggest a parallel between Manning Clark's history and its great themes and the Labor government and my role in it.

Politics is too much concerned with the day to day to discern a pattern. A politician's energy is so often expended on combating necessities which in the longer run seem petty and even inconsequential.

We are also required to fight on fronts which historians of the Manning Clark variety are inclined to think of as pedestrian and even philistine. Reform of the taxation system and changes to the regulations affecting banking - these things were not exactly grist to Manning's mill.

Nor do historians have to live out the daily grind of beating back one's political opponents.

For all these reasons it is often very difficult for politicians to hang on to the long view - the "vision thing" as someone called it. But let me say that the Manning Clarks of the world, the historians who work on a big canvas, can help them do it.

Because, buried beneath the weight of daily necessity and all the words necessary to meet it, there **is** something of an affinity between we politicians and the historians.

For, in truth, politicians who believe in their cause are always conscious that they have a story to tell. Indeed the telling of it is an essential ingredient of success.

When a government cannot convey a story - a consistent story - the people lose faith in the government.

It is one of the meanings of that expression for disaster - "losing the plot".

The other meaning of the story in politics is that same vision thing, one's ambition for the country and a notion of how it might be realised.

We in the Labor Party take the view that we have the vehicle - the only suitable and reliable vehicle - which can change Australia as necessity and ambition demand.

In the 1970s some of us in the Labor Party formed the view that if Australia was to realise its great potential and meet the challenges it faced, the Party needed to be rid of its traditional phobias.

Labor had to rid itself of prejudice which narrowed the possibility of change, and which in fact stood in the way of its great ideals.

It had to embrace the pluralist reality of Australia. It had to make a virtue of it, extend it, celebrate it.

It had to recognise and accept that, for all their collectivist traditions, Australians believed in free enterprise and that they were right to believe in it - because, without question, it delivers more freedom and more wealth and, in the end, more social justice than any other.

Labor had to open itself up to reality, to the world.

It had to recognise that, perhaps as never before, the story of Australia was bound to be part of the world story.

And through Labor, Australia itself could become phobia-free, conscious and proud of its best traditions and its capacity to adapt, a modern social democracy and a substantial and creative player in the world.

For ten years now, despite the political machinations and the stumbles, despite all the interventions of forces within and beyond our control, this is essentially the story the Labor Government has been telling.

The point of the last decade is change and improvement: to change the culture and the structure, to build on our material and human strengths and give ourselves a chance in the world.

This is not the time or place to tell you why I think we now have that chance. But in the emergence of unprecedented opportunities in the Asia-Pacific, and in the fundamental changes in the Australian economy and our business and industrial culture, the chance is there. It is a better chance, I believe, than Australia has ever had before.

And when the history is written, I think it will be seen that it was in these two decades that we grasped the chance - and set Australia up for the twenty-first century.

The danger is always, I think, that a country's story - or the story of a political party - should ossify.

In our national life there are things we should hold sacred, things which no generation should be allowed to forget.

Among these I would number our commitment to democracy, freedom, justice, fairness, our love of the land and our best institutions and traditions.

We should keep these values forever in the foreground and of course we should honour all those in peace and war who have defended them.

But, because it is anathema to those very traditions, we should resist the temptation to say that one individual or group has a monopoly on these things.

I can vouch for the temptation to do this in the Labor Party. I venture to say Sir John Gorton can vouch for it in the Liberal Party.

Legends give a nation strength. They give us coherence, confidence and belief. But they also have the capacity to freeze us in our tracks. They have the capacity to exclude new generations. They can underpin democracy and they can under**mine** it.

Last year was the 50th anniversary of a number of major battles fought by Australians in defence of their country. They were as significant as any fought by Australians - in a sense, more significant, because they were fought in defence of this country and the life that Australians had made here.

They were fought by men and women of my parents' generation.

It seemed to me that they had not been spoken for as the soldiers of the First World War had been, because they were not there at the birth of the legend of Anzac.

It seemed to me appropriate last year to speak for them.

And it also seemed to me that there had to be lessons to learn from these events in our region, and that we should not be afraid to confront the controversy which has long surrounded some of them.

There were some who took offence at what I had to say; there were others, including veterans of the battles, who supported me.

My point was that in paying the respect that was due, it was necessary to recognise that the Australian military tradition - like every other tradition - does not belong to anyone except the Australian people.

It is not the basis of a political party, interest group, religion or sect.

It is not the preserve of one generation - if it is allowed to become so it will die.

What is more, it can most certainly withstand re-thinking and re-interpretation, just as it can withstand the addition to it of neglected episodes in our history - like the Sandakan death marches, or Vietnam. In the past twelve months I have been present at the inauguration of memorials to both.

My point is that if we don't question we can't imagine.

It is bit like the gift an historian must have - to see beyond the received wisdom and what has been set in stone.

An historian has to have an imagination.

So does a nation - so does a government.

If we can't imagine we can't determine our future, we can't act, we can't change. And we'll fall behind.

That is the point about honouring our legends and traditions. We fail ourselves, we fail future generations and we fail those whose memory we are honouring if we do not re-think the meaning of received wisdom in the light of contemporary need.

It seems to me the same with political parties.

In the Labor Party we honour our heroes. We make much of our history and traditions.

But it would be fundamentally silly to live by the letter of their thought.

I have no doubt that, confronted with the necessities of this era, Ben Chifley and John Curtin would have responded with measures quite different to those they thought appropriate to the forties.

And while I know my opponents are outraged when I venture on their territory, I have to say the same is obviously true of Menzies.

I mean, in recent years three historians have written books based on the Menzies papers held in the National Library's manuscripts collection. Yet Allan Martin, Judith Brett and David Day have reached very different conclusions about Menzies, about what he stood for and what he means to us now.

This seems to me to say not only that it is impossible to arrive at the one true story, that it depends on one's perspective; but that it is foolish to conceive of one's heroes as bearers of the Holy Grail. Or to let <u>their</u> life and times determine ours, or what the future will be.

It is one thing to honour heroes and heroic acts, and to memorialise and see the lessons they teach. But it is another thing entirely to let them hold up the progress of succeeding generations.

Let me conclude by drawing a parallel with Mabo. Just under two weeks ago, I spoke at the opening of a memorial in Sydney to the men who died in what was surely among the worst episodes in our history - the death by torture, execution and disease of nearly 2000 Australians at Sandakan in Borneo.

No Australian would for a moment question the propriety and historic justice in the erection of the Sandakan memorial or in the very moving ceremony that was conducted there.

Yet there are people who will say that the memory of death by massacre, torture and disease, when it was inflicted on Aboriginal Australians, should be expunged. That to pay tribute to their memory is an exercise in guilt. That one memory is legitimate, the other the product of a guilt industry.

I say we can't be so selective. I say that we must pay tribute to the good and the bad in our history and that when we honestly do that we are not held up but given the strength to make progress.

I spoke earlier about the daily machinations, misinterpretations and accusations which are the daily stuff of politics, and which sometimes make it very difficult to keep a grip on the story.

With Mabo, it is essential that we do.

With Mabo, I am prepared to wear short term politics for the long term result. Mabo is part of the big story and it can't be left to short term expediency and cynical compromise.

Mabo demands a mature national response. We need to see Mabo not as a problem but as an opportunity to **solve** the problem. A mature national response demands honesty and imagination. Honesty because we can't build this country on a lie.

We need imagination because we need to imagine an Australia without the blight of Aboriginal dispossession and disadvantage.

We need also the capacity to imagine what our failure would mean. What it would mean to the self-esteem of this and future generations. What it would mean to our reputation in the world. What it would mean to a future generation who, on coming to the National Library, saw in the documents here that we once had an opportunity to solve our oldest and deepest problem and we did not care enough to grasp it.