

Ambassador's message No.53

(The Japan-Australia Grassroots Exchange Programme)

11 October 2017

Dear friends,

On the 20th and 21st of September, I attended final events in Canberra for Japan-Australia Grassroots Exchange Programme. This programme invited Australians who were imprisoned as prisoners of war by the Japanese imperial army during World War II and their family members to Japan, and I would like to introduce this programme to you.

Around 22,000 Australians were taken as prisoners of war by the imperial army and the navy of Japan in the Pacific War. The strong anti-Japanese sentiment that remained among sections of those associated with the Australian military as a result of the harsh experiences of these prisoners of war led to a realisation of the need to invite former Australian prisoners of war and their family members to Japan in order to encourage reconciliation and exchange, as well as mutual understanding and friendship between both nations.

The Japan-Australia Grassroots Exchange Programme was a product of that realisation. This programme, which began in 1997, invited 120 former Australian prisoners of war and their families to Japan, where they were able to deepen their understanding of the effort, society, and culture that emerged in the free, democratic and peaceful nation of Japan after the war. In addition, visits were made to various regional cities that housed former POW camps, as well as to the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Yokohama.

On the other hand, as the number of former prisoners of war who were able to visit Japan steadily diminished, a decision was made following consultation with the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) to bring the programme to a close.

Hence this year, while looking back on the achievements of the Grassroots Programme, a seminar of the programme and an anniversary reception marking the conclusion of the program occurred along with the creation of a report on the programme's outcomes. These events were attended by the Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Mr Simon Lewis PSM, Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin AC, Chief of the Australian Defence Force, and Mr Robert Dick, RSL National President and distinguished guests.



My opening address to attendees



Opening address by RSL National President,
Mr Robert Dick

Through interactions with members of the RSL, I am confident that as a result of this program former POWs have formed a new view of Japan, and this program has greatly contributed to the promotion of post-war reconciliation between Japan and Australia.



Speech by the Hon Dan Tehan MP,
Minister for Veterans' Affairs

In my speech at the seminar of this program I have stated that, in order to build upon this spirit of reconciliation, I would like to express my sincerest, most heartfelt gratitude to those former POWs who chose to visit Japan despite their misgivings stemming from the cruel experience they had in the POW camps, to their families and associates.



Experts in Japan-Australia relations answering the questions from audience members

I do feel that after listening to those who participated in the visits to Japan, and hearing of their past experience and their desire for stronger relations between Japan and Australia, that this program did indeed encourage an “exchange of minds” between Japan and Australia with an eye to our future.



Receiving a gift of appreciation from Mr Robert Dick, RSL National President

Upon the conclusion of these events, I reiterated my appreciation as the Ambassador of Japan to the members of the RSL together with those who have been involved in the creation and running of this program. It is my every intent to continue working earnestly towards a peaceful future in Japan and Australia's relationship.

It is in recognition of how Japan and Australia deepened their co-operative relationship across many fields based upon the spirit of post-war reconciliation, and how this built the "special strategic partnership" we share today, that I endeavour to further promote exchange between younger generations of Japanese and Australians through initiatives, such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme and the JENESYS Programme. As I am once again made aware of the necessity to commit to exchange between our younger generations, I renew my pledge to continue to work with my colleagues and Australian counterparts to achieve this.

Yours sincerely,

/S/

Sumio Kusaka

Ambassador of Japan to Australia