

News from Under the Southern Cross – Edition 5. The Emperor’s Birthday Reception

11 March 2021

(1) The Most Important Event of the Year

This is now a tad dated, however I wanted to report on the Emperor’s Birthday Reception that took place at the Ambassador’s Residence on the 25th of February. Among the myriad of events that the Embassy engages in as a diplomatic institution abroad, the most important of these is the Emperor’s Birthday Reception. All nations have ceremonies to mark their “national day” (such as independence days etc.), and in the case of Japan, it is the Emperor’s Birthday Reception.

The reception is attended by not only Australian federal cabinet ministers and departmental executives including those at the secretary level, but brings together members of parliament, members of the Australian and other militaries, business community representatives, renowned journalists, ambassadors and dignitaries from various nations, as well as members of the Japanese community. While its principle concern is a celebration of His imperial Majesty the Emperor’s birthday, the reception provides an ideal opportunity to express a deep appreciation to all those engaged in advancing the Japan-Australia relationship on a day-to-day basis and to promote the brand of ‘Japan’ in Australia.



Ambassador and Mrs Yamagami with Hon. Dr David Gillespie MP (Chair of the Japan-Australia Parliamentary Friendship Group)



(From Left) Hon Warren Entsch MP, Mrs Yamagami,
Hon Susan Ley MP, Minister for the Environment, Ambassador Yamagami, Minister Furuya

(2) Getting Things Underway in the Midst of COVID-19

As you would expect, there was considerable discussion and debate about whether to hold the reception this year. In the end, given that the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), in which Canberra resides, had not experienced any new locally acquired infections for seven months, and that the ACT government's own protocols permit the holding of a reception so long as it takes place outdoors, maintains 'social distancing' and is limited to 500 guests, a decision was made to go ahead with the reception while keeping in close contact with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

In light of this decision, the Embassy proceeded to implement its COVID-19 prevention strategy in full. This consisted of a variety of mitigation measures, including (A) placing hand sanitizer stations at various locations around the Residence grounds and having guests' temperatures checked at the entrance gate, (B) service of food in the form of appetizers, distributed by wait staff using utensils (C) the use of masks by Ambassador and Madam Yamagami and the Defence Attaché and his wife while meeting guests on the receiving line, and (D) having speeches performed from the balcony of the Ambassador's Residence during the ceremony, thus maintaining an appropriate distance from guests.

(3) A Great Success

In the end, the reception was a great success. Close to 330 guests attended, which considerably surpassed the number of expected attendees, and members of the diplomatic staff and their

spouses were able to engage in pleasant conversation beyond the planned time. Many of those who attended provided a favourable evaluation of the event, saying “Just when I thought that COVID-19 meant that we weren’t going to be able to hold these sorts of convivial events and what a shame it was, Japan came through with the goods. It was both timely and enjoyable”.

While I might be blowing my own horn here a bit, the Embassy was able to make the full use of its resources and offer the best of Japanese hospitality. For example;

(A) Use of the Garden

The Ambassador’s Residence in Canberra possesses a beautiful, accessible Japanese garden. By opening up the Garden and requesting guests not to congregate within the buildings of the Residence, we were able to avoid the “3 Cs” (closed spaces, crowds, and close contact). Despite the fact that it was in summer in the Southern Hemisphere, and the appearance of a fierce storm on the morning of the reception which resulted in a temporary blackout, by the time the reception began in the evening we were blessed with gentle ‘clear Japanese weather’, which was indeed fortunate.



Japanese garden at the Ambassador’s residence

(B) A Menu of Japanese Cuisine

Guests who visit the Japanese Ambassador's Residence expect to dine on Japanese cuisine. To that end, Chef Ogata and the members of "Team Japan" prepared hundreds of individual portions of Japanese dishes that can be enjoyed while standing-up (Udon noodles in cold broth, Prawn Tempura, Sushi, Gyūdon, Wagyū Steak, and Dorayaki). These dishes were distributed among the guests and were very well received. And of course in relation to drinks, heaps of Australian wines, which have experienced some difficulties as of late, were served to guests.



Chef Ogata preparing Sushi

(C) Linking together Government and Private Industry

What particularly struck me were the strong reinforcements provided by various members of the private sector. For example, one of the principle Saké breweries of Ibaraki Prefecture, Ippin Shūzō, provided a well-known saké blend that was a favourite of mine during my time as a police officer there. The ice creamery matchamatcha also provided a Matcha-flavoured soft serve ice cream that proved very popular. I am also indebted to Kirin, Asahi, Suntory, and Itōen for providing us with many varieties of beverages.

I was also treated to the spectacle of the newest models of vehicles manufactured by Honda, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Toyota, and Isuzu lined up in the grounds of the Residence. This left a strong impression of both the variety and technological capabilities of Japan's automobile manufacturers.

Within the Residence itself, ANA, JAL, JR Tokai, Fujitsu, Hitachi, Daimon and Yamaha Motors all provided fascinating examples of their products.

Not only this, and based on consultations with relevant stakeholders, exhibits such as the much-vaunted HE (Hydrogen Project), models of 'Hayabusa No.1 and No.2' provided by JAXA and Questacon, Japan promotion material provided by JNTO and tourism brochures from Nagaoka City in Niigata Prefecture and Gunma Prefecture, as well as plush toys celebrating the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, were displayed through the cooperation of relevant groups and corporations. I believe that these provided both a broad and deep introduction to Japan.



Display of Hayabusa 1 & 2 satellites by Questacon and JAXA



Display by JNTO

(D) Kimono

Honestly speaking, I was yet again greatly moved by the kimono worn by Japanese women. Over 10 women, including the wives of diplomatic staff, were bedecked in these brilliant Japanese fabrics, and flitted about the Residence grounds like so many butterflies to be met with exclamations of delight from attendees. I myself wore my favourite Paul Stuart suit, hoping it may appear very smart. However after being told by a long-time female Australian friend that “Compared to a kimono, it’s pretty plain”, “You pale”, I sadly accepted this fact but was glad for the reaction that the kimono produced.

(E) Speeches

I am profoundly grateful to our Guest of Honour, the Hon. Dr David Gillespie MP (Chair of the Japan-Australia Parliamentary Friendship Group) for giving a speech imbued with warm feelings towards Japan and generous doses of humour. As for myself, I was acutely aware of the fact that it is often said that “speeches by staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are a combination of three things – long, repetitious, and annoying”. Hence as a newly appointed ambassador I humbly delivered a speech that was as brief as possible, to the point, and interspersed with jokes ([see attached file](#)). As an expression of my feelings of gratitude and respect towards achievements made over many years, achievements which have built the trust existing between Japan and Australia, I decided to give mention to a number of companies and specific examples of their achievements.



Ambassador delivering his speech

(4) In closing

As a consequence of the limits on attendee numbers because of COVID-19, unfortunately I was not able to invite everyone whom I wanted to this year’s reception. I very much look forward to extending an invitation to all and sundry once the opportunity avails itself, and humbly ask for your understanding in the interim.

YAMAGAMI Shingo