

Speech

Presented by His Excellency Mr Yamagami Shingo,
Ambassador of Japan to Australia

On the occasion of the JABCC – AJBCC Future Leaders Joint Business Forum:
'Australia and Japan: Leading the New Normal' (Webinar)
Tuesday 16 March 2021

Your Excellency Ambassador Adams,
Sir Rod,
Dr Mimura,
Future Leaders Program Members,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentleman,

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I am speaking from, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

It is a pleasure and an honour to have the opportunity to address you, the participants of the Future Leaders Program. As the name suggests, it is you, the young business leaders of today, who hold the reins to the future of our bilateral relationship.

In the years to come, your actions will help to shape Japan-Australia ties, and I for one look forward to witnessing the heights that your contributions take the partnership to.

In preparation for today's speech, I wanted to find an inspirational saying to encourage you to get back on the horse and bring the house down.

In Japanese there is the saying 'even monkeys fall from trees', which reminds us that everybody, even those who are the best in their field, go through periods of difficulty.

I wasn't sure how well this idiom would go down however, because I know you don't have monkeys in Australia. And I've heard that the animals that do drop from trees do so purposefully in order to ambush their human prey.

The theme of today's session, 'thriving in a crisis', was chosen I believe because of the uncertain situation we find ourselves facing with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this theme has been relevant to the Japan-Australia friendship for decades. Indeed, supporting each other during uncertain times has long been a hallmark of our relationship.

Ten years ago, Australia was there when Japan was dealing with the aftermath of the most devastating earthquake ever recorded on our shores. Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard was the first foreign leader to visit the Tohoku region. In that dark hour, Australia provided Japan with food aid packages, donations and much needed relief personnel on the ground.

Japan was honoured to have the opportunity to return some of the favour last year during the Black Summer bushfires. Our Self-Defense Force flew two planes and a relief team to Australia to assist with the transportation of supplies to fire-hit areas.

This history of mutual support during trying times has fostered a strong trust between our two nations; a trust that is the foundation of our relationship today.

In regards to the crisis we find ourselves in right now, the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be said that Australia has accomplished truly admirable success. The ability of Australians to come together and work towards a common goal has stemmed infection rates and enabled the country to continue living in comparative normality.

Japan too has been relatively successful in its response to the pandemic. Both our nations have been able to avoid overwhelming our health systems and the strict nationwide lockdowns that have occurred in other parts of the world.

It is an unfortunate reality that despite our successes, beyond our shores the pandemic has caused the global environment to become increasingly volatile and complex. But it is also true that throughout this period the Japan-Australia friendship has remained stable.

This stability is not mere coincidence. Rather, it is the culmination of decades of trust-building by people like yourselves; leaders who not only believe in the importance of the Japan-Australia friendship, but who work tirelessly to support it.

The decision-making of Japanese business leaders at All Nippon Airways, for instance, amplified this trust. Despite the severe financial pressures of the pandemic, ANA leaders chose to continue operating between Japan and Australia. They provided the sole flight between our two nations, allowing thousands of Australians to return home safely.

Similarly, Australian business leaders at healthcare provider Aspin Medical built up our bilateral trust. They provided Japan with their services in the medical management of over two hundred crew members from the Diamond Princess. Thanks to the reliability of Aspin Medical, all of those crew members were successfully discharged from secondary onshore quarantine and repatriated.

And so, as you can see, there are numerous examples in which leaders in Japan and Australia have supported each other through hard times. But in order to create opportunities amidst uncertainty, we cannot focus solely on the crisis in front of us.

Opportunities are not like drop bears; they don't just fall on top of you. And so we must also keep our eyes wide open to the prospects around us.

New frontiers of cooperation for Japan and Australia have continued to emerge unaffected by the pandemic. Over the past year alone, leaders from both the public and private sectors have been strengthening our ties in areas such as hydrogen, infrastructure and even space.

Japanese business leaders have been making strides to efficiently produce and transport hydrogen from Australia to Japan, helping Australia towards its goal of becoming a global leader in the supply of clean hydrogen energy.

The development of Western Sydney has also seen numerous Japanese businesses sign agreements to partner with the New South Wales Government on a range of exciting infrastructure initiatives.

And, as Australia looks to grow its space sector, Japan's space agency JAXA has been providing opportunities for cooperation, such as in the landing of its Hayabusa 2 capsule in South Australia last year.

Another reason to keep our heads up and our eyes facing forward is that crises do not last forever. With the vaccine rollout underway in both Japan and Australia, the resumption of international travel between our two nations is becoming more attainable day by day.

We know that tourism between Australia and Japan was an important element of our relationship before the pandemic and so it will be afterwards. Australians who visit Japan are considered by leaders in the Japanese travel industry to be an important asset to their market, as they spend the largest amount of money per person and they have a long average stay of thirteen days per trip.

Similarly, the appetite of Japanese travellers for holidays in Australia has not waned. Japanese travellers are still drawn to the prospect of an Aussie holiday, out of their love for Australian food and wine, the natural landscape and its reputation as a safe destination.

I know that Hakuba and Niseko are popular travel destinations for Aussies. But I'd urge you all to consider the benefits of a trip to the beautiful mountain resort of Karuizawa. There, you could enjoy hiking, cycling, onsen, and a bev or two with me at my place. I've never been to Bonnie Doon, but I'm willing to bet Karuizawa has got just as much 'serenity'.

I would like to conclude my remarks by emphasising to you, the future stewards of the Japan-Australia relationship, that trust has been and will continue to be our greatest asset.

No matter what crises we may face, with trust as our foundation, the sky is the limit for our partnership.

I encourage you to utilise that trust in order to make the most of opportunities. But please also build on that trust to sow the seeds for future cooperation.

Thank you.
