

The Canberra Times

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Public Service Newsletter



How one diplomat is getting to know Australia

It's a relationship growing in scope and importance for Australia as the region undergoes a rapid shift in the balance of power.

Public servants in Canberra will work increasingly closer with their counterparts in Japan, as ties with Australia's second-largest trading partner extend further into areas such as defence cooperation.

Japan's ambassador to Australia, Shingo Yamagami, started his posting in February and in his first few months has visited the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, Victoria and Cowra in central-west NSW, a town of special significance to the Australia-Japan relationship.

In my [interview with Mr Yamagami](#) last week, he discussed the ties between the nations in terms of their potential for future growth: "Our relations are in an excellent state, but at the same time it seems to me we have taken each other for granted," he said.

"The Japanese love things Australian, but that said, are we really aware of the full potentials of our bilateral relationship? There is a lot we can do together."

Mr Yamagami said he wanted to raise Japan's profile in Australia - and Australia's profile in Japan.

Asked about the Reciprocal Access Agreement, which would bolster defence relations, he said it would serve as a deterrent against any possible disruptions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

He's been a public servant for almost 37 years, and has been assigned to work in New York, Washington, Hong Kong, Geneva and London before landing in Canberra. I asked him what role Japan and Australia's public servants would play in fostering relations between the countries.

Mr Yamagami said he had two mottos: stay intellectually curious, and maintain mutual respect and tolerance with counterparts.

He explained: "Intellectual curiosity is very important for public servants, especially for diplomats. Because wherever you go, you have to be a bridge between the recipient country and your home country. If you do not hold any intellectual curiosity, you cannot get into the loop of that society."

Before he came to Canberra, he asked his Australian friends to recommend Australian films and books that would let him get to know the country. He's watched *The Castle*, *Red Dog*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Breath*, and says they've helped promote his understanding of Australia.

"Through this process, I will have more sympathy towards things Australian. I think this process is very, very important for any public servant or diplomat."

On having mutual respect and tolerance, he said: "You always notice there are some gaps in terms of language, culture, history. So there are some issues your host country may have a different view from your home government. Under those circumstances, while you make your efforts to make a bridge between two divergent views or positions, at the end of the day, you have to keep respect and tolerance. This is more so when it comes to dealing with some sensitive issues."

It's important to hear about the ambassador's approach to diplomacy, considering he will be part of the significant conversations between Australia and Japan ahead.

The April edition of *The Public Sector Informant* is out now, looking at what the [cabinet reshuffle last week really achieves](#) for equality, why last year's lows in Australia-China relations [don't have to be a sign of things to come](#), and how [COVID-19](#)

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Thanks for reading,

Doug Dingwall

The Canberra Times public service editor

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