

News from Under the Southern Cross (Edition 56): Conferral Ceremony for Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard

7 February 2022

A long-awaited day finally arrived. This was the conferral ceremony for the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun on former Prime Minister the Honourable Julia Gillard AC as part of the Spring 2021 Decorations.

1. Unbeaten by COVID

It was April last year when I conveyed news of the award to former Prime Minister Gillard, while she was staying in London. Since then, I have been eagerly trying to work out when to hold the conferral ceremony. Once it became possible to again make return trips from abroad, which had long been prevented by COVID related border restrictions, I made the decision to invite former Prime Minister Gillard to my residence following her return to Adelaide in South Australia.



Welcoming former Prime Minister Gillard to my residence

Given how open and down-to-earth Ms Gillard was during our subsequent phone conversation, and the heart-warming message she had conveyed at the reception to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake (see ‘*News from Under the Southern Cross, Edition 11: 10th Anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake*’ [here](#)), I looked forward with great anticipation to the day I would be able to greet her in person.



The Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun

2. “The Lady in Red”

On the evening of 4 February, the arrival of former Prime Minister Gillard to my residence at the appointed time left the deepest impression on all of the assembled Embassy staff including me, who had been awaiting with much anticipation.

Her dazzling crimson dress reminding many Japanese attendees of the red circle of the Japanese national flag. Her smiling visage, imbued with clear, sharp intelligence and conviviality. Her language, brimming with humour and delivered in a crisp, even tempo. Her equal treatment of everyone. All of this combined produced an aura for which I cannot find the words.

Actually, whenever these conferral ceremonies take place, the Embassy in Canberra makes it a rule to host either a reception, or a lunch or dinner in conjunction with the ceremony on the basis of the preference of the recipient. The recipient may invite whomever they wish in order for them to celebrate together. In the case of former Prime Minister Gillard, she let me know of her intention to invite a number of advisors and personal secretaries who supported her during her time in politics to a small dinner event.

This fact in and of itself spoke volumes to me of the beliefs and personality of Ms Gillard as a politician. I then well understood the reasons, apart from being Australia's first female Prime Minister, why Ms Gillard is often regarded as "one of Australia's most popular former prime ministers."



Former Prime Minister Gillard with the Residence garden in the background

3. Enormous contributions at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake

One of the principle reasons for the conveyance of this Grand Cordon award was the enormous contributions that Ms Gillard made as Prime Minister at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake ten years ago.

Prime Minister Gillard was the first foreign leader to visit the Tohoku region in the aftermath of the earthquake disaster. After arriving in the town of Minami Sanriku in far off Miyagi Prefecture, the sight of Ms Gillard handing out gifts of toy koalas and kangaroos to children worn out from fatigue and worry at the evacuation centre will never be forgotten.

At the time of the earthquake, the RAAF had a total of 4 C-17 transport aircraft. Yet it was the Gillard government that dispatched all 3 of those aircraft capable of mobilisation to assist Japan. It was the Gillard government that dispatched an urban search and rescue team to search for the missing, and it was the Gillard government that delivered specialised pumping equipment to assist efforts in cooling the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. It was the Gillard government that also came up with a plan to assist in the education of children in the disaster-affected region, and to invite school children from the Tohoku region to study in Australia (my speech at the conferral ceremony, which touches upon Ms Gillard's enormous contributions, can be read [here](#)).



Visiting Minami Sanriku in Miyagi Prefecture in April 2011



Conveying the Grand Cordon

4. A cosy dinner event

The dinner that took place after the conferral ceremony was an extraordinarily warm, enjoyable event where the laughter never ceased. The stories that Ms Gillard relayed to us one after another were both profound and very interesting! At the same time, I was impressed by the way she let others speak, which is so characteristic of a great listener.

In preparation for the event, Chef Ogata spent 4 days preparing and cooking 'pâté en croute', a dish that he previously submitted to a culinary competition in Japan. Together with dishes such as the Kobe beef which had been specially delivered from Japan for the event, and the nigiri-sushi which was made meticulously, I do believe that we were able to convey the heartfelt appreciation of the Japanese people and the atmosphere of celebration both to Ms Gillard and to the government-related guests in attendance.

After dinner, while cradling a glass of 'Hibiki' whisky, I lost track of time as we whiled away the evening, regaling one another with stories, which in my case included the secret episode (or horror story!) involving the Japanese dolls in the Ambassador's Residence.



Chef Ogata preparing his pâté en croute



Chef Ogata together with former PM Gillard

5. Promoting education and the position of women in society

After leaving the position of Prime Minister, Ms Gillard has actively continued her involvement in the advancement of social agendas, giving her support to efforts to provide educational opportunities to children in less fortunate parts of the world and to advance the position of women in society.

The positive reaction shown by her when I informed Ms Gillard that last year, over half of all fast track recruits admitted into Japan's foreign ministry were women, was particularly memorable.

I am certainly looking forward to my next opportunity to chat with her while enjoying a fine Japanese meal.

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