

News from Under the Southern Cross (Edition 58): The Emperor's Birthday Reception Mark II

24 February 2022

The Emperor's Birthday Reception took place at my Residence in Canberra on 14 February, a little ahead of the actual birthdate of His Majesty the Emperor on 23 February.

1. Why the 14th?

There may be a few people wondering "why on earth did you decide to hold it on Valentine's Day?" Naturally it would have been ideal to hold it on the 23rd, however keeping local circumstances in mind, it was important to hold it on a day when our invited guests would find it easy to attend.

In Canberra, the weeks in which Parliament sits are pre-determined. In order to ensure that we can have cabinet members and members of Parliament in attendance, we have to hold the reception in a week in which Parliament is sitting. Otherwise, we can't guarantee the attendance of parliamentarians as they would have returned to their electorates.

This year is also an election year. Expectations are that the government and opposition will be battling it out in May. With this political situation in the background, we cast an eye over the limited weeks in which Parliament is sitting and thus decided to hold the reception on the 14th.



(Picture Caption: The attendance by so many guests made the Emperor's Birthday Reception particularly vibrant. Source: Angela Elgiva.)

2. Attendance by many cabinet members and parliamentarians

Thankfully, through the arrangement of schedules, we were able to have many guests in

attendance. The Guest of Honour for the event was the Honourable Tony Smith MP, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives who will be retiring from politics at the next election. Not only has Mr Smith worked tirelessly over many years as a great friend of Japan, he has been a mainstay of Parliament whose impartiality in the running of Parliament transcended party divisions and earned the respect of many.



(Picture Caption: Together with former Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Hon. Tony Smith MP. Source: Angela Elgiva.)

In addition, we were also able to secure the attendance of former prime minister the Honourable Tony Abbott AC, with whom I have had shared many a candid exchange of views. The reception was also attended by three current members of the federal Cabinet, namely Trade Minister the Honourable Dan Tehan MP, Environment Minister the Honourable Sussan Ley MP, and Sports Minister Senator the Honourable Richard Colbeck.



(Picture Caption: Former PM Tony Abbott delivering his speech. Source: Angela Elgiva.)

In addition to the political world, the reception was attended by those from the public service, business sector, cultural figures, and not only Japan and Australia but those from other friendly

partners as well. All together, we had close to 400 guests, far exceeding last year's numbers. It was certainly a dazzling, vibrant reception, bursting with so many different talents.



(Picture Caption: Attendance by current members of Cabinet.)

Trade Minister the Hon. Dan Tehan MP (above right), Environment Minister the Hon. Sussan Ley MP (above left), Sports Minister Senator the Hon. Richard Colbeck (below)

(Source: Angela Elgiva)

3. “The best reception in Canberra”

I am pleased to note that receptions hosted by the Embassy of Japan, with our sublime Japanese garden and various types of Japanese cuisine on offer, have gained quite a reputation in Canberra.

Thanks to fervent assistance from Gifu Prefecture, we were able to offer Hida Wagyu steak and strawberries brought directly from Japan for this reception. These were very enthusiastically received! Not only this, Residence Chef OGATA, whose passion and determination very much resemble that of a “Showa period gentleman”※ despite his youth, spent many sleepless nights and days expending every effort in preparing flavour-rich Japanese curry and ramen soup for the event.

※ “Showa period gentleman”: old-fashioned in a positive sense. “Showa period” in Japan corresponds to 1926 to 1989.

Our guests were thus able to fully appreciate a taste of Japan.

An Australian food critic whom we invited to the reception expressed his astonishment with

cries of “Oh wow! Fantastic!” at the range of flavours and dishes available. The hospitality was thus well worth the effort.



(Picture Caption: Chef OGATA with Hida Wagyu) (Picture Caption: Strawberries from Gifu Prefecture)



(Picture Caption: Various Japanese dishes being served)

(Source: Angela Elgiva)

For this reception, I had also requested the presence of singer Ms Kay Hughson, who is of Australian-Japanese heritage and who delivered beautiful renditions of the Japanese national anthem “Kimigayo” and the Australian national anthem “Advance Australia Fair”. Her passionate renditions of the hits of Olivia Newton-John during the reception also added colour and poignancy to the event.



(Picture Caption: Ms Kay Hughson. Source: Angela Elgiva.)

4. Mobilising an “All Japan” effort

The strengths of “the Land of the Rising Sun” not only lie in cuisine and music. The reception also featured a range of well-known Japanese brand names from a broad range of industries, including cars, defence equipment, home construction, energy provision, electrical appliances, airlines and tourism, whose wares were exhibited on display.

Starting with the Toyota-manufactured hydrogen-powered car “Mirai”, guests were able to enjoy a fraction of the range of products made by the technological power that is Japan. The Embassy also prepared some Japanese-style gift bags, which was the first time we had tried offering ‘souvenirs’ including Yakult products and various pamphlets for guests to take home.

The reception also featured a demonstration of the tea ceremony by the Urasenke school and flower arranging (Ikebana). These certainly caught the attention and interest of our Australian guests. It was an opportunity for them to experience soft power refined via the unique history of Japan.



(Picture Caption: An exhibition of the tea ceremony by the Urasenke school, and Ikebana)



(Picture Caption: Guests show their interest in the Japan corporate exhibition)



(Picture Caption: The Toyota-manufactured, hydrogen-powered car “Mirai”) (Source: Angela Elgiva)

5. A stimulating and amusing speech

Taking the opportunity, my speech this year was my attempt to look back in earnest on developments in the Japan-Australia relationship over the past year. However, if this duty is given to a typical bureaucrat from Kasumigaseki (the area of Tokyo that houses the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government departments), the end result is tedious and dull. How on earth can we escape the 3 strikes of speeches: long, repetitious, and boring? It is a perennial problem for Japan’s diplomats.

This time, or more accurately once again, I tried narrowing things down and gave my speech a lighter touch. Given that my audience would be standing through all this while holding a glass in one hand, it’s the least I could do. Thanks to the talents of my speech writer, the venue was engulfed in laughter.

So, how was the result? I’ll leave that judgement to my readers (my speech can be read [here](#)).

They say, “when it comes to presentations, night is falling, but there is still a long way to go.” I’ll continue to work hard to become a more effective and persuasive diplomat including in one on one situations.



(Picture Caption: Delivering my speech in front of the Japanese and Australian national flags. Source: Angela Elgiva.)