

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 64):

Farewells and First Encounters

18 March 2022

As a diplomat, meeting people is our work – therefore, first encounters are never-ending. At the same time, this is often accompanied by sad farewells. Lately, several people close to me have passed away in the same short time period. Although working in different fields, these people all had connections to the Japan-Australia relationship and – as I express my deepest condolences – I would like to introduce these people to you.

1. Mr SAIGO Teruhiko

On 20 February, in news reported widely in Japan, singer and actor SAIGO Teruhiko passed away. He was my close friend, and I respected him greatly.

Last year, Mr SAIGO came to Sydney to undergo prostate cancer treatment not yet approved in Japan. He persevered with his treatment, residing in Australia for many months. What's more, taking time out from his treatment schedule, he went out of his way to come to Canberra. His stay at my residence and our pleasant conversation seems to have occurred only yesterday.



With Mr SAIGO Teruhiko in Sydney in May last year

We were two friends who came from utterly different worlds – entertainment and diplomacy – yet we shared a love of reading. We also shared strong feelings about our country. He was a great mentor to me, giving heartwarming praise whenever he saw my TV interviews or my address at the National Press Club.

“I will come back to Australia”. With this, he set out on his journey back to Japan, leaving a bright, invigorating smile. It is my deep regret that these words of his were never realised. I express my sincerest condolences to his wife and daughters.

2. Senator Kimberley Kitching

The sad news came quite suddenly. While I was on a business trip in Sydney, I saw the scrolling ticker on the television screen. Kimberley had suffered a heart attack while driving between meetings in her home state of Victoria. This awful news was a great shock to me.

It was just after I took up my post as Ambassador that I first met Kimberley. I was seated next to her at a dinner organised by a think-tank. She started introducing herself to me with a wide smile and said, “My friend Andrew (Director-General of National Intelligence, Andrew Shearer) has told me so much about you”.

Although from the Labor Party, she enjoyed popularity across the parliamentary floor, and was known as a “politician with a moral compass”, frankly putting forward her firm opinions, particularly on national security issues. At the same time, she overflowed with a unique charm, ensuring everyone around her felt her warm-hearted thoughtfulness, never lacking a friendly smile.

It was also Kimberley who invited me to sit in on a public parliamentary hearing. We had a number of opportunities to exchange opinions, but I would never have thought that our meeting in Melbourne a few weeks ago (which I talked about in my [News From Under the Southern Cross, Edition 60](#)) would be our last! She was only 52 years old – a Senator with enormous potential yet to be realised. Her passing is a great pity.

My thoughts and prayers are with her family.



With Senator Kitching in February this year.

3. Ambassador of Italy to Australia, Francesca Tardioli

Even in Canberra's diplomatic community, where there are many unique Ambassadors, Francesca was a prominent figure. While on holiday back in Italy, she passed away at 56 years old.

As well as having the cheerfulness and merriness much associated with Italians, Francesca was also tenacious in her lobbying around issues such as climate change. Although our interests didn't always converge – given my advocacy for the importance of strategic issues in the Indo-Pacific – I felt a lot of good will towards her as a colleague.

I also caught a glimpse of the lesser-known side of her. This was after the screening of the film 'Persona Non Grata', which tells the story of SUGIHARA Chiune (which I discuss in my [News From Under the Southern Cross, Edition 47](#)). She rushed over to me as soon as the film had finished, on the verge of tears, and said to me, "Shingo, that was incredible". Not only strong in reason, she was also a compassionate diplomat. Francesca, may you rest in peace.

4. To Sydney

When met with misfortune, many Aussies often say 'life goes on'. While swallowing their sadness, they look ahead and keep on walking. I quite like this bright expression.

Even on my business trip to Sydney, while these sad news kept coming in, I had a new encounter. I met famous 'think-tanker' Tom Switzer, (whom I first met in Tokyo over five years ago) at a dinner hosted by former prime minister Tony Abbott. Immediately, I was asked by Tom for an interview on his popular ABC radio program, which focuses on current affairs.



Tom Switzer's radio program, "Between the Lines"

(Source: ABC Radio National)

As one would expect from the battle-hardened think-tanker, I was thrown a series of sharp and carefully-aimed questions on issues such as Ukraine and Taiwan, and I felt much like I was batting under precision bowling. I responded while keeping in mind the stomach breathing

technique taught to me by Mr SAIGO, while asking myself what Kimberley and Francesca would say. (You can listen to the recording of my interview [here](#).)

Indeed, life goes on. As one of those who remain in the land of the living, I will cherish the life given to me and keep on making my small contributions to the best of my ability. I vowed to do so on my way back to Canberra, as I gazed out the bus window at the endless fields and penetrating blue sky.

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