

Speech

Presented by HE Mr YAMAGAMI Shingo

Ambassador of Japan to Australia

**On the occasion of the AJS 50th Anniversary Celebration
at Old Parliament House – Saturday 20th August 2022**

Thank you Dianne.

Senator Catryna Bilyk, Former Chair of the Australia Japan Parliamentary Group

Mr Ron Murray, Executive Chairman of Murrays Australia

Mr Philip Mitchell, President of National Federation of AJS

Mr Terry Colhoun, Former President of AJS ACT

Ambassador John McCarthy, Former Ambassador of Australia to Japan

Ms Dianne Fitzpatrick, President of AJS ACT

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening.

It is my absolute honour to join you all in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Australia-Japan Society of the ACT.

First of all, I would like to convey my heartfelt congratulations to AJS as well as every single one of its members on reaching this very special milestone.

I won't ask how old you were five decades ago.

Some of you may want to claim that you were not even born yet, but let me tell you that 1972 in Japan was quite a memorable year indeed.

Those of you who are old enough to remember can reminisce with me.

Fifty years ago, Japan hosted the Winter Olympics in Sapporo.

And Okinawa was finally returned to Japan in May of that year.

A Japanese soldier, Sergeant YOKOI Shoichi was found in Guam after hiding in the jungle for 28 years after the end of World War II.

On the brighter side, Olivia Newton-John visited Japan for the first time in 1972!

A symbol of Japan's modernisation, the Shinkansen achieved a world record-breaking speed of 286kms per hour.

Since this outstanding accomplishment, Japanese technology has demonstrated exponential growth.

And the fastest record for a Japanese train to date is a staggering 603kms per hour, which was achieved in 2015 by a JR Tokai magnetic levitation train.

Of course, this speed is too fast for actual service, so it is only for testing.

But it's hard not to get excited about this amazing feat over half a century!

Returning to the 70's, the Basic Treaty of Friendship of Cooperation between Japan and Australia was signed in 1976.

To reach this monumental achievement between our two countries, officials from both sides worked tirelessly.

Back then, correspondence took time and many meetings were held face-to-face.

It is hard to imagine how they maintained this momentum without the modern luxuries of email and online meetings.

But it proves their determination and commitment was undeniably steadfast and unwavering.

While our governments were working on the Treaty, our Aussie friends were working hard at the grassroots-level to establish the Canberra branch of AJS.

It is truly remarkable to know that back then Aussies from all walks of life were so far ahead of governments and were making their own progress in establishing friendship between our two countries.

I am constantly fascinated by everyone's stories and how wonderfully varied their connections with

Japan are.

It would be far from exaggeration to say that AJS's history as an organisation is intertwined with the histories of those members who worked so hard to bring Japan and Australia closer.

You might open a history book and see the names of politicians and top business executives who are acknowledged for their contributions.

However, the truth is the real work has been and continues to be done by the goodwill and generosity of everyday Australians outside of the limelight.

The wonderful friendship we enjoy today could not have been possible without you.

Our friendship started from the bottom up, forming a strong and sturdy foundation made up of each and every one of you.

As the Ambassador of Japan to Australia, I am so grateful.

I am quite sure many of you must have heard about the Lowy Institute's 'feeling thermometer'?

In 2021, Japan ranked third at 73 degrees only behind New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Given the familial relationships Aussies share with their British and Kiwi counterparts, I find this incredibly impressive.

Clearly, many Aussies view Japan as one of Australia's closest friends.

And I can reassure you, the feeling is of course mutual.

Australia has proven they will stand with Japan in times of need as good mates do.

Most recently, we received an extraordinary outpouring of sympathy from our Aussies friends immediately following the tragic death of former Japanese Prime Minister ABE Shinzo last month.

Soon after the shocking news broke, I received phone calls from several former Australian Prime Ministers.

Prime Minister Albanese and Foreign Minister Wong visited my residence to sign the condolence book out of respect to Mr ABE.

And the Embassy received countless flowers and heartfelt messages from everyday Aussies.

I was so moved by these kind gestures.

It made me realise how much Aussies appreciate his contribution to our bilateral relationship.

During his visit to Canberra in 2014, he delivered an historic address to the Australian Parliament as the first Japanese Prime Minister to do so.

And some of you may have even had the opportunity to meet him during his visit here.

In fact, Mr ABE visited Australia five times during his prime ministership, more than any other Japanese Prime Minister.

Indeed, Prime Minister Albanese is quite right in saying that ABE san was a true friend of Australia.

By the way, among the attendees tonight I recognise the faces of my good friends, Bob and Maureen Griffiths from Cowra!

If the number of visits is something to go by, the seven times I have visited Cowra must mean the people there think I'm an alright bloke?!

AJS has made many outstanding achievements over the 50 years.

What has touched me in particular has been the Tohoku Youth Program.

It has been 11 years since the disaster and this tragedy is deeply engraved in the minds of many Japanese people including me.

It also remained in the hearts of AJS members and they have made such a difference to the lives of many young Japanese affected by it.

These youngsters were welcomed into the homes of many Canberra families and treated like one of their own.

And I am confident their time spent in Australia will forever remain in their hearts as well.

On more of a personal note...

Since my arrival in Australia, I have had the joy of participating in a number of AJS events.

Yet I'm still waiting to take part in the softball tournament, Dianne!

I'm told there was a state-of-origin-esque rivalry between the Embassy and the AJS-CJC combined team.

So fierce that even some diplomats injured themselves trying to win!

I promise you, I won't go doing anything silly, but please hurry up and organise the next tournament!

Otherwise, my glove will go mouldy!

Before I finish, I have a couple more anecdotes about Japan for you.

The average life expectancy is well over 80 years old now and it is expected that more than half of those born after 2007 will live beyond 100 years old!

Currently, there are over 86,000 centenarians in Japan!

For your information, these Japanese oldies number enough to fill up the entire Stadium Australia – of course if only they are able to travel to Australia!

And they say 50 by our standard is still young and AJS has just passed the half way mark – gosh!

Japan and Australia's relationship has never been better and it is expected to reach even greater heights!

Congratulations on 50 wonderful years!

It is my dream to live another 50 years to celebrate the centenary of AJS with many of you!

Thank you.