

Royal Botanic Gardens Bonsai Exhibition Opening Ceremony Speech

Saturday 10 September, 11:00 AM

Mr John Siemon, Director of Horticulture at the Royal Botanic Garden

Mr Graham Ross AM VMM, Director of the Australian Garden Council

Ms Megumi Bennett, Honorary Patron of the Bonsai Society of Sydney

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

Let me first start by expressing my sincere condolences on the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

As someone who enjoyed the luxury of conversing with her at the Buckingham Palace about ten years ago, I agree with so many others that Her Majesty was such an outstanding figure with robust intellectual curiosity and a great sense of humour and wit.

Her contributions are enormous. She will be greatly missed. May she rest in peace.

As Japanese Ambassador, I am fully aware of how our Japan-Australia relationship is broadening and deepening far beyond the traditional areas of trade and security.

And actually, today's bonsai exhibition gives us a glimpse into how our relationship is expanding – or, might I say, 'blossoming'.

Firstly, there are many similarities between our relationship and bonsai.

Just like a bonsai, our relationship is something that has been carefully grown and cultivated over many years.

If bonsai are cared for properly, they can live for hundreds of years and be passed down through many generations.

And just like this, we owe our current relationship to the unceasing care of Japanese and Australians who made sure that new buds would continue to sprout, and that these buds would grow bigger.

But, fortunately for us, unlike a bonsai, our relationship has grown much bigger than one metre!

Secondly, while Japan and Australia share strategic interests, it is through cultural exchange that our people have begun to understand each other on a deeper level.

This mutual understanding is now the cornerstone of our relationship.

You know, it does not surprise me that Australians love nature just as much as the Japanese – when you are surrounded by this vast natural environment, you can't help but appreciate it.

... Even if there are so many dangerous creatures hidden there.

... Such as the magpie.

If I may, I would like to talk about Ms Bennett, who has done so much to promote bonsai in Australia. In Japanese, we have the word 'en'. It means 'fate' or 'destiny'.

I believe 'en' must play a major role in Ms Bennett's life, because it was only when she won a bonsai in a raffle that she became fully involved in the world of bonsai.

I heard that, through bonsai, she wanted to become the bridge between Japan and Australia.

Now, I know you Aussies love your meat trays, but I'm glad she didn't win one that day!

Perhaps if she had, we would be at a very different exhibition!

Either way, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ms Bennett, and also her husband Brian, son Alex and the many others at the Bonsai Society of Sydney who have helped her to make good on her promise of becoming a bridge between our two countries.

I heard that the Bonsai Society of Sydney started out as just a small group of students under Ms Bennett's tuition.

But in the years since then, this group has grown to over 100 members, and have exhibited their works all over the world, including in Europe and the United States.

By the way, in Japan, bonsai has a reputation for being a bit of an old man's hobby.

Hence, I am a little worried that if I take up bonsai, some might think that I have entered my twilight years.

So I am grateful to hear that bonsai is now gaining popularity among young people too.

Well, I think I had better stop here. If I blurt out anything else about *my* interest in bonsai, who knows, perhaps in a decade or two my own bonsai will be on display.

So finally, let's thank the 'en' that has brought us together, and pray that this exhibition leads to even greater mutual understanding, which gives so much strength to our Japan-Australia relationship.

Thank you.