

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 90):

Her Majesty the Queen and Australia

23 September 2022

News of the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has raced around the world. In Japan it is not really all that well-known that Australia was one of the countries where this news resonated loudest. Hence I would like to explain about it in this edition of my newsletter.



(Source: Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet website)

1. The head of state is the British monarch (the Queen)

One question that I am asked from time to time by people in Japan is “Who is Australia’s head of state?” Indeed, as there is both a prime minister and a governor-general, many seem inclined to speculate on which of these is the head of state.

In truth, the British monarch (the Queen) is Australia’s head of state. The Governor-General, whose residence is located in Canberra, is the resident representative of the Crown in Australia. This all harks back to Australia’s history as a British colony.

To makes things just a little more complicated, each of the states, such as New South Wales and Victoria, has their own resident governor. At the state level they are referred to as “Governor”, while the post in Canberra that encompasses the entire nation of Australia is referred to as the “Governor-General”.

2. Australia’s ties with the monarchy

Queen Elizabeth II had very deep ties to Australia. In February 1954 she was the first ever reigning British monarch (or Queen) to visit Australia, where she stayed for 8 weeks. It is said that when she arrived on the royal yacht in Sydney Harbour, she was given a rapturous welcome by a million Aussies.



At the NSW State Parliament during the first visit to Australia in 1954

(Source: NSW State Parliament website)

Thereafter she periodically visited Australia, which she journeyed to a total of 16 times over the course of her 70-year reign. When I heard about how many visits she had made, it provided a stark contrast to something I heard while I was serving in Japan’s diplomatic mission to the UK a decade or so ago, where I learned that up until that time, no UK Foreign Secretary had visited Australia for over a decade.

The affection was mutual. Just as there are those within Australian society who

have a deep admiration and affection for the Crown, the Crown's own strong affinity for Australia appears to have sustained the relationship. Incidentally, Queen Elizabeth II's successor, King Charles III, spent some of his time as a high school student in Australia and became a big fan of the country. At one time he was even being talked about as a potential King of Australia by the Australian press.

3. Relations between Australia, the UK and the US

Having written this far, there may be some wondering "Isn't Australia America's closest ally?", and "Which is Australia closer to – the UK or US?" An accurate answer would probably be "while the nature of their relationships differ, it's close to both of them".

Many Australian political scientists and historians have pointed out that following the Fall of Singapore in 1942, the role of being Australia's most important defence and security partner shifted from the United Kingdom to the United States.

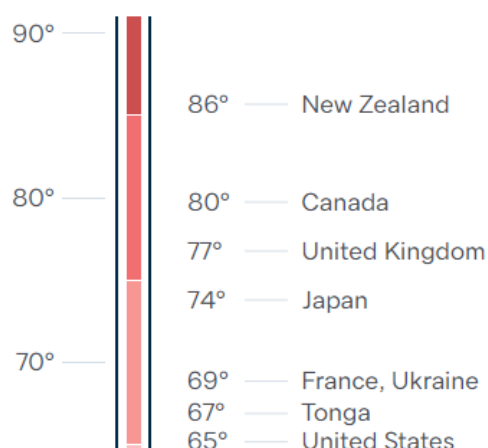
In the wake of the geostrategic change this brought about within the international community, it is true to say that it also changed the relationship between each nation. And yet I do feel the robust ties in history, culture, and blood that Australia has with the UK whenever I am in contact with Australians.

For example, both former Prime Minister Tony Abbott and former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull were members of the so-called Oxford group of exchange students who studied under the Rhodes Scholarship. When I was speaking with one of the senior executives of Australia's intelligence agencies, I learned that a former MI6 chief is his cousin, whom I both respect and associated with. Australians, when talking about Americans, use the term 'cousin' from time to time, but in the case of Australia and the UK, actual cousins form the core of the states!

In conversation at social engagements, it does seem to me that quite a few influential Australians are attracted to London rather than New York as their vacation destination. A senior Australian official explained this to me, saying "we resolve the irony of it together". Of course, we can't forget the competition

between Australia and the UK in sports like cricket, rugby, and soccer as well.

A recent Australian opinion poll rated New Zealand, Canada and the UK as the countries for which Australians felt the most affinity (by the way, next came Japan). An historical event such as the passing of Queen Elizabeth II saw such emotions flood to the surface.



(A survey conducted by the Lowy Institute in 2022. It uses a thermometer to show the degree of affinity that Australia has towards other countries)

4. A warm response

Looking at things this way, you can well understand the background to the warm-hearted response shown by Australians, including the attendance at the state funeral for Queen Elizabeth II on 19 September by Prime Minister Albanese and Governor-General Hurley, the designation of 22 September as a national day of mourning following their return to Australia, and the ceremonies that will take place in Australia on the same day.

Following the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, the venue for foreign ambassadors to sign a condolence book was not the British High Commission but Government House, the residence of the Governor-General.

I myself have some special memories of Queen Elizabeth II. Around 10 years ago, when I was serving as Political Minister in the Embassy of Japan in London, I accompanied then Ambassador HAYASHI Keiichi (who later went on to become a Supreme Court judge in Japan) to his Ceremony of Presentation of Credentials. At Buckingham Palace, I was afforded a one-on-one opportunity to

listen to Her Majesty's words.

It was while I was signing the book, expressing my most deeply felt condolences, that I recalled how I had been able to have a glimpse of Her Majesty, her openness and frank way of approaching people, her vigorous intellectual curiosity and her exquisite humour and wit.

It was indeed precisely because of the heavy responsibility borne by Her Majesty over her 70-year reign that the UK, Australia, and even Japan and the international community as a whole regarded this as the end of an era.



Bouquets of flowers decorate the Queen's Terrace within Australia's Federal Parliament House

5. The republic debate

Without doubt, Queen Elizabeth II's character and her high reputation had a direct link to the response in Australia mourning her death. One influential politician even revealed that "A majority of the politicians in the ruling Labor Party are republicans, but they agree that Her Majesty had a special presence". To put this another way, some indicate that the debate about adopting a republican model of government will again rise to the fore under the Queen's successor, King Charles III.

Put simply, the republic debate in Australia can be summarised as "It's odd that we can't choose our head of state. A mature Australia should be able to have a president as our head of state instead of a British monarch". However it appears that opinion is divided when discussing the specifics, such as whether a president should be selected through a popular vote, or whether someone should be appointed following selection by the Federal Parliament.

This issue didn't just suddenly emerge from out of the blue. During the 1990s some fierce debates surrounding republicanism took place in Australia, and at a national referendum held in 1999, 55% voted in favour of retaining the current constitutional monarchy as opposed to the 45% who wanted to amend the constitution to adopt a republican model of government.

I have heard that among the supporters of republicanism, there are those who advocate removing the Union Jack, the flag of the United Kingdom, from the Australian national flag, and others who want the portrait of the British monarch removed from Australia's currency. One can even find republicans amid those affiliated with the conservative Coalition, such as former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

The antithesis to the republican argument, and one advocated by those in favour of a constitutional monarchy, goes "Our ties to the British monarchy are one facet of Australian history. It has united us as a nation. Thus there is no need to suddenly change what has been working so well". By the way, King Charles, when he was still known as Prince Charles, publicly declared that "This is an issue for Australians themselves to resolve".



The Australian national flag
featuring the Union Jack



The logo of the Australian Republic Movement

Australian society is distinguished by its multiculturalism, and has changed after widely accepting immigrants not only from the UK, but from other parts of Europe as well as Asia and the Middle East. It goes without saying that as witnessed through the formation of AUKUS and the negotiations with the UK over an FTA, the UK will continue to be an important partner for Australia. For the UK, which has raised the placard of "Global Britain" in the wake of Brexit, Australia is obviously the best choice of partner for strengthening its

engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

While this debate continues, attention will be on what sort of relationship Australia will have with the British monarchy.

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