

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 100):

Australia-New Zealand Relations

31 January 2023

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's announcement of her resignation was big news here in Australia, also I thought I would take this opportunity to discuss my impressions of Australian views of New Zealand, because I have been receiving requests from my readers to explain Australia-NZ relations.

1. Brotherly Love

Many Australians would likely say that the country they feel the closest affinity with is still, without a doubt, New Zealand.

As also demonstrated in a poll by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, the countries Australians feel most favourably towards are New Zealand, followed by Canada and the United Kingdom (and then Japan). In addition to sharing fundamental values, it is also significant that both countries share a common language, culture and lifestyle.



Results from a 2022 poll by the Lowy Institute. Favourability towards other countries is shown in the form of a temperature scale.

If you dive deeper into the history of these two nations, there are commonalities in that both saw settlers arriving from Europe (particularly the United Kingdom),

and cultivating the land while experiencing friction and clashes with indigenous populations. Both countries are still key members of the Commonwealth, and the depth of ties with the United Kingdom is clearly demonstrated on both countries' flags.

When I was working on trade negotiations at the Permanent Mission of Japan to Geneva around 20 years ago, Australia and New Zealand – as agricultural exporting countries - were (and still are) key members of the 'Cairns Group'. This group were pushing a fairly hard line for Japan to open up its agricultural market. It was often the case that we would engage in fierce negotiation with Australia on rice and beef, only to realise there was still some strict negotiation ahead with New Zealand on dairy products. In this way, while they have separate seats at the negotiating table, those in Japan tend to view them as one.



The flag of Australia



The flag of New Zealand

Both flags bear the symbol of the Commonwealth, the Union Jack, and the Southern Cross, however the differences lie in the number, shape and colour of the stars. The biggest star on the Australian flag is referred to as the 'Commonwealth Star'.

2. The difference in size

First and foremost, Australia and New Zealand are vastly different in size.

Australia has a population of around 25 million, and an area approximately 20 times the size of Japan. In contrast, New Zealand is only three-quarters the size of Japan, and has a population of 5 million. This also includes the approximately 600,000 New Zealanders currently living in Australia.

This being said, in the minds of Australians, it seems that New Zealand is regarded as having a similar status to the six states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, etc.). I have actually met an Australian who made such a claim.



The dramatic difference in size between Australia and New Zealand

Source: Google Maps

What is more, although in Japan it is recognised that Australia and New Zealand form one section of the ‘Five Eyes’ group, I have heard that among Australian experts, there are those who point to the difference in the quality and scale of intelligence in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, and refer to the grouping as ‘Four Eyes Plus a Wink’. Of course, such a description might not be received so warmly in New Zealand.

3. Admiration

At the same time, I have also met a fair few Australians who express something akin to a longing for New Zealand, as a place with things no Australian could dream of in their homeland.

The diverse landscapes – including 4000m-high snow-capped mountains – are very distinct from those of Australia, and so many Aussie tourists enjoy a trip to the Land of the Long White Cloud. That New Zealand is a great sporting nation just like its neighbour is also clear to see, particularly on the rugby field, where Australians’ dearest wish is to see the Wallabies triumph over the All Blacks.



Photos of New Zealand taken by an Embassy staff member on holiday. Australians, too, are enchanted by this scenery so different to that of Australia.

The fact that the two countries have worked together at key junctures in modern history is also an important element – including during the First World War, when soldiers who enlisted from Australia and New Zealand (dubbed ANZACs) fought together at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. At the ANZAC Day ceremonies which I attend each year on 25 April, I am always interested to see that the Australian Prime Minister and New Zealand Ambassador play a leading role.

4. Adapting to the changing strategic environment

In the midst of this, both countries recognise the issue of managing the great strategic changes in the Pacific and Indo-Pacific regions – likened to a seismic shift. One aspect of this shift for New Zealand is Australia's position as its largest trading partner being overtaken by China.

As I have often explained in this newsletter, Australia has become involved in, or stood up on its own, initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS. Therefore, there is always the question of how New Zealand will respond to this.

Some readers may recall in the mid-to-late 1980s, New Zealand's Lange Administration made public its anti-nuclear stance and refused the entry of American warships into a New Zealand port, becoming the focus of much debate over the alliance. Since AUKUS was formed the year before last, there has also been debate over whether the nuclear-powered submarines to be introduced by Australia will be allowed to enter New Zealand's territorial waters.

To ensure the security of Pacific Island countries – including the Solomon Islands – too, it is more vital than ever for Australia and New Zealand and, by extension the United States and Japan to align their perspectives of the security environment.

5. A good little brother

Given everything that has been discussed so far, you can see that the Australia-New Zealand relationship is in fact quite different to the one perceived from Japan.

Indeed, it was interesting and eye-opening to witness the reactions across all areas of Australian society following the sudden announcement of resignation by Prime Minister Ardern, who had received much attention internationally. As a Labor Prime Minister, the main centre-left newspapers were overt in their praise of Ardern's achievements and their disappointment over her resignation. On the other hand, scathing assessments of her time in office were occasionally heard from centre-right journalists and business leaders.



Meeting between Prime Minister KISHIDA and Prime Minister Ardern (April 2022, Tokyo)

Source: Japanese Cabinet Public Affairs Office

Although separated by 2,000-odd km, these countries are close in mindset, and have deep relationships across various fields, including in the political sphere. With this background in mind, I felt that the reaction to Ardern's resignation was based on a sense of kinship, if you will.

Which reminds me of something an Aussie once said to me. "The Kiwis (a nickname for New Zealanders) are like a good little brother, handsome and well-kept. But, when it comes to taking care of house affairs, they will leave matters to their older brother – the Aussies. That is what Australians think of New Zealand."

Does that sound about right to you? Of course, I will always recommend that, unless you live here, you take a trip to the Southern Hemisphere to see these two intriguing countries for yourselves.

YAMAGAMI Shingo