

Congratulatory Remarks

**Presented by HE Mr YAMAGAMI Shingo,
Ambassador of Japan to Australia**

**On the occasion of the Conferral of the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Silver Rays
on Ms Eriko Prior
Ambassador's Official Residence, Canberra
3 March 2023**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you to this residence today for the conferral of the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Silver Rays upon Ms Eriko Prior.

This award is bestowed on individuals in recognition of their outstanding and meritorious contributions in the public service.

So, congratulations Ms Prior on this wonderful achievement and in particular, being the first ever locally engaged staff to receive this award in Australia.

I don't need to list up her great achievements as most of you here are already well aware.

However, some of you including Grace and Riley, her two grandchildren do not really know how special their obachan is, so let me highlight some of her many achievements for you.

Ms Eriko Prior joined the Embassy in 1988 and worked until her retirement in 2010, spending a whopping twenty years in her role!

While working for the same company all your life is quite common in Japan, it is quite remarkable by Australian standards, I'm told.

And given how many different ambassadors she has worked under, I applaud her resilience and patience.

To be exact, she worked with ten different ambassadors.

We all know that each and every ambassador is different and unique, and I am sure she has lots of interesting stories to tell.

She might want to share some juicy stories with us over a cup of sake or glass of wine later.

Joking aside, she worked in the Cultural section, and her main role was to coordinate the MEXT Scholarship and youth exchange programs.

She has helped send so many Australians to Japan.

Many of whom are now scattered around Australia and Japan working in different fields to advance our bilateral relationship.

When I meet MEXT alumni from her time at the Embassy, they fondly recall her generosity and professionalism.

Her successor told me that when she took over the job, she felt overwhelmed because she had such big shoes to fill.

There were so many things to learn, so she had Eriko-san on speed dial for a year just so she could call and ask questions.

Indeed this was like a human Google; An endless supply of answers.

Thank you for keeping the helpline going for as long as you did.

Her other responsibilities were organising cultural events to showcase Japanese culture in Canberra.

This involved looking for venues, sourcing artists, and putting together invitation lists for events.

I assume diplomats then, must have been impressed by her extensive network of people in the community to make these events a success.

With an abundance of knowledge, skill, and experience, she was an invaluable asset.

Diplomats may come and go, but it is the role of locally engaged staff to ensure the foundation of the Embassy's activities remain solid and strong.

She also served as a committee member for the Australia-Japan Society.

She joined the committee in 1997, and served for more than twenty years and became an integral part of AJS.

She organised countless activities for members, new and old.

One of the most adored events was the East Meets West charity concert.

I had the pleasure of hosting it last year, and immensely enjoyed the beautiful performance by my friend, GOTO Aiko of the ACO in an intimate setting in this residence.

On a lighter note, many of you know that Ms Prior is synonymous with golf.

Of course, I do not mean to say she was in the same boat with those ambassadors who are busy playing golf and hardly working.

In fact, her love for the sport has brought together our two countries in the much-loved Australia-Japan Goodwill Golf Tournament.

She successfully got sponsors onboard with many prizes to attract participants.

One must have very good negotiation skills to secure such sponsorship.

We could run through more events that she organised, but finally I want to highlight her contributions in supporting the Tohoku Youth Program.

Fundraising is a challenging task, but that did not stop hardworking Eriko-san in raising money each year.

She also volunteered as an interpreter for the participants and ensured everyone had a pleasant stay in Canberra.

I can imagine the comfort the children felt knowing she was around to help them during their stay in an unfamiliar environment.

These are just some of the examples of her contributions through the Embassy and in AJS, and ultimately her contribution to the friendship enjoyed by Japan and Australia.

With her kindness, reliability, selflessness, and positivity, she is the go-to person: someone who never says no.

She is highly regarded within the community and this award recognises her longstanding efforts in and outside of the Embassy.

And so it is with deep gratitude that on behalf of the Government of Japan, the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Silver Rays is hereby awarded to Ms Eriko Prior.

Congratulations, again.

Thank you.