

Ladies and gentlemen

Good evening to you all

I would like to express my profound gratitude to the ACT Government, Chief Minister Barr, the Canberra Nara Sister City Committee, all related organisations and those who planned this tremendous event, along with all of you who are attending this evening.

My wife, Ikuko and I have been very much looking forward to participating in the Candle Festival since my arrival in Australia last April. I was posted to Australia 34 years ago as a junior diplomat, and I am often asked “what is the difference between now and then in Canberra?” Of course I realized that Canberra has grown much larger than the time I was here before with some new buildings. Other changes include the Candle Festival which is one of the biggest festivals in Canberra but it was not held up until 2003. Furthermore Canberra-Nara sister city relations were not established until 1988.

I would like to draw your attention to the relationship between Canberra and Nara as well as Japan. There is one Australian man who lived in Canberra and coached the ACT Brumbies that has contributed to the promotion of our bilateral relationship. He is Mr. Eddie Jones, former Wallabies mentor who has coached Japan’s National Rugby team for the last 4 years. Eddie Jones led the Brumbies into the beginning of their best period of their history when he was coach. More recently he led Japan’s national team in arguably the biggest upset in rugby union history with their win against South Africa’s Springboks as well as two more wins in their pool matches at this year’s Rugby World Cup. I am now strongly supporting the Wallabies and I am confident they will do us proud in the upcoming semi-final and final matches.

I also recently came across some encouraging numbers and figures that symbolize how popular Japan is among the citizens of Canberra. One is the number of Australian students who are studying the Japanese language at schools in ACT. The number of Japanese learners among Year 1 to Year 10 increased from 6,000 in 2010 to 10,000 in 2015. In those five years, the number jumped up by an incredible 65%.

The other number that surprised me was the 5 minutes it took for the Embassy of Japan's Windows to World program to fully book out, making it the very first one among 40 participating embassies. The Chief Minister himself even chose to participate in our program.

The Embassy of Japan believes that the people of Canberra are eager to study Japanese and to learn more about Japanese culture because they feel close to Japan through the sister city relationship with Nara in Japan, and the Candle Festival plays an important part in this.

I believe that this festival celebrating the strong sister city relationship of Nara and Canberra has contributed to the promotion Japan and Australia's relationship. I, together with you all, shall strive to further promote our relationship.

In closing, I would again like to express my thanks to all those involved in the organisation of this year's Candle Festival for their tireless work, and hope that the friendly relationship between Canberra and Nara, and indeed between Japan and Australia, grows ever fonder and stronger.

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