

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the on-line celebration of the birthday of His Majesty, Emperor Naruhito.

It is my great pleasure to be able to address you on this auspicious occasion since I arrived in Melbourne just a few weeks ago.

Today, His Majesty the Emperor Naruhito turns 61. He took reign just under two years ago on the 1st of May, 2019. As you may have heard, Melbourne was one of the cities His Majesty visited at the age of 14 during his first overseas trip.

He stayed with a homestay family in South Yarra. Before making his second trip to Australia with Empress Masako in 2002, he said "I still clearly remember my first visit to Australia in 1974. First and foremost, I felt the sheer size of Australia, the warmth of the Australian people, and the abundant Australian nature. My home-stay experience with an Australian family became one of the greatest memories of my life."

I have shared a similar experience. About 40 years ago when I was a young University student, I visited Sydney, which was my first overseas trip. Ever since then, I have been longing to return to Australia so I am truly happy that I am now able to work here.

As for Melbourne, this is my very first time here. My initial impression of Melbourne is that it is a wonderful city with abundant greenery and great traditions and rich culture. I also sense a new kind of future here.

I look forward to exploring more opportunities for introducing Japanese culture; and meeting with many people in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania which my office covers; and making a concerted effort to further strengthen the Japan-Australia special strategic partnership.

I would like to take this opportunity today to express my deepest sympathies to those who were affected by last year's bushfires as well as those who have been personally impacted by COVID-19. The health pandemic is still ongoing, and I feel sorry to say there are many people who are having a hard time or feeling anxious being separated from their families.

Japan and Australia have a history of helping each other in times of difficulty.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake. At that time, Australia deployed its rescue team to the disaster-stricken area in Tohoku. The Japanese people will not

forget the support and courage provided by the Australian people while East Japan areas have recovered and are even moving forward with new technology and innovation, like the Hydrogen Energy project in Fukushima.

And during last year's Australian bushfires, the Government of Japan dispatched the Japan Disaster Relief Team and the Self-Defense Forces provided emergency relief supplies including masks through JICA - The Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Many Japan-related groups made donations and Japan provided assistance through the Japanese satellite 'Himawari-8'. The status of bushfire affected areas was updated almost instantly through high-resolution images and temperature data delivered by the satellite. This provided crucial information to the Australian emergency services to accurately predict the spread of bushfires and make vital decisions on when and where to dispatch firefighters.

Looking to the future, cooperation in the space field will become more important than ever. The return of the Japanese asteroid explorer Hayabusa2 launched from Tanegashima in Kyushu to Woomera in South Australia last year is a prime example of the magnificent bond between Japan and Australia.

Speaking more on the Japan-Australia space relationship, I would like to refer to Dr MOHRI Mamoru, a famous Japanese astronaut and the Executive Director of the Mirai in Tokyo. Dr Mohri received his doctorate in Chemistry from Flinders University in Adelaide in 1976. He mentioned that his experience studying abroad in Australia helped him to make his childhood dream of becoming an astronaut come true. He has sent through a video message which we will show you later.

On the economic front, the Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain project, a world-first of its kind started in Victoria, will be shortly carried out in a full-scale operation. The liquefied hydrogen produced from brown coal in the Latrobe Valley will be shipped to Japan by a unique liquefied hydrogen transport tanker made in Japan. I will work hard to further contribute to the development of trade and investment especially in the area of new technologies between Japan and Australia.

Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I hope to be able to bring as many positive stories to light as possible.

While Japan is hoping to host the delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games this year, I would like to further promote exchange in sister cities, sport, academia, and culture by utilising online devices and more.

Having said that, I would also like to visit all of the three states - Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania as many times as possible.

Lastly, I would like to talk about the Melbourne Japanese Summer Festival. Since 2010, this festival has been one of the largest Japan-related events in Victoria.

This year, due to the pandemic, the festival will be held online for the first time on Sunday the 28th of February with the theme "Kizuna (ties) – We, together". Various Japan-related artist performances, cooking workshops, and activities such as origami and anime drawing – will all be held virtually via live streaming and social media.

There will even be a 'Best Dressed' award over social media, so please join and enjoy the event. We will show you a preview shortly.

Before I conclude, I would like to sincerely thank the Premiers of Victoria, South Australian and Tasmania for their kind messages.

Thanks for joining us today. I look forward to seeing you again, hopefully in person, next time.