

Good evening and welcome to this year's Emperor's Birthday Reception. It is wonderful to see so many familiar faces in the crowd. I'm glad that the weather is much better than last year.

I am sure you will agree that the last 12 months of the Australia-Japan relationship have been significant. Last October, Melbourne was host to nearly 650 delegates participating in the AJBCC/JABCC Joint Conference, which was filled with activities to further strengthen our friendship.

The two-day conference saw some fantastic panel sessions associated with the theme of Looking Towards the Next 60 years of Partnership, across areas such as energy transition and security, innovation, new technologies, and the future of work. I would like to thank the AJBCC Committee and the Victorian Government for their tremendous work in putting this conference together.

We were delighted to welcome a number of VIP guests to Melbourne for the conference, notably Mr. NISHIMURA Yasutoshi, Minister for Economy, Trade and Industry. Minister Nishimura visited Melbourne with a delegation of more than ten Japanese start-up companies for the purpose of business matching and encouraging investment.

In order to further strengthen the relationship between our two countries, it is important to further deepen economic ties through direct investment. Japanese investment ranks third in the world in terms of total GDP, and its large market size is a major attraction for companies.

According to INSEAD's Global Talent Competitiveness Index, Japan is ranked first in the world in terms of its excellent human resources base, and is first in terms of competitiveness in the field of research and development.

Japan's business environment has also improved significantly in recent years. The Japan External Trade Organisation provides necessary information in English such as support systems and flowcharts for companies wishing to expand into Japan.

Mr. OMURA Hideaki, Governor of Aichi Prefecture also visited Melbourne to close the AJBCC-JABCC conference with the announcement that Aichi Prefecture, Victoria's sister state for nearly 44 years, will host the upcoming conference this October. I hope that Australian start-ups will take the opportunities associated with this conference to expand their business connections in Japan.

I am sure many of you here this evening will be going to Nagoya for this event. I hope you will have time to visit the Studio Ghibli Park in Nagakute City while you're there. When I visited the park in 2022, I came home carrying a large replica of the cat bus from My Neighbour Totoro... perhaps you will have more self-control in the gift shop than me!

Shortly after the conference, Mr. YOKOYAMA Hideyuki, Mayor of Osaka, visited Melbourne in support of the 45th anniversary of the Melbourne-Osaka sister-city relationship. I would like to extend my gratitude to the City of Melbourne for hosting this delegation. I'm sure Osaka is already busy thinking about how to host a reciprocal visit in the future.

This year there are four sister cities reaching important milestones. Greater Shepparton City Council will celebrate its 45th anniversary with the city of Oshu in Iwate Prefecture, and Macedon Ranges Shire Council will mark its tenth anniversary with Tokai City in Aichi. We congratulate these cities and wish them the best for their ongoing strong engagement.

Mayor YOKOYAMA used his visit to Melbourne to promote the 2025 Osaka Expo with his sidekick Myaku-Myaku. It was the first time for Mayor YOKOYAMA to travel overseas with Myaku-Myaku. Perhaps it's time for the City of Melbourne to have its own giant mascot?

Speaking of Osaka, I know that George Shaw continues to work very hard on preparations for the Melbourne to Osaka yacht race, and I am pleased to share with you that there are currently 31 yachts registered to compete from four countries (Australia, Japan, Canada and New Zealand) in March of next year. There will be a maximum of 50 yachts entering the race - I wonder if it's too late to get my boat license? I think 'JJ' would look great painted on the side of a yacht!

In May of last year, Hiroshima was the host of the G7 Leaders' meeting, which Prime Minister Albanese was invited to attend. Leaders discussed continued efforts to support a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, foster a strong and resilient global economy, and accelerate the decarbonisation of our energy sector, amongst many other topics. I am glad to see that work being done here in Melbourne aligns with these priorities.

Last Friday we held a conferral ceremony to present the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Rosette, to Mr. Ross Ciaravolo. Ross was the President of the Australia-Japan Society of Victoria, now known as the Australia-Japan Business Council of Victoria, for many years. He made a significant contribution to the promotion of Australia-Japan relations across business, education and culture. Please give him a warm round of applause.

I hope on the way in tonight you noticed the Toyota Hydrogen Bus sitting out the front of my residence. I'm sure my neighbours are wondering why there is such a large vehicle parked here, but I wanted everyone to see this wonderful technology up close. Toyota is working hard towards implementing more sustainable public transport with zero emissions. We are also lucky to have two Mirai II vehicles on display. One of these was brought by Toyota, but the other belongs to Dr. Alan Finkel, one of our guests here this evening.

Mitsubishi has also brought its Outlander and EK Cross vehicles for you to view. I might talk to our ministry about expanding the size of the garage here so I can buy all three cars!

Additionally, Hydrogen is beginning to play a role in our homes. In July last year, I was thrilled to be invited to the unveiling of 'HyHome', Australia's first hydrogen-powered home which uses Rinnai's hydrogen hot water system. I hope to see more of this technology rolled out across Victoria and I am looking forward to the day our ministry agrees to install one of these units in my residence. I would love to have the first diplomatic home powered by hydrogen!

I also hope the HESC project will continue to progress well in the commercial demonstration phase following the successful completion of the pilot project in February 2022.

In South Australia the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry continues to grow, with Jurlique recently becoming a member. On my visit to Adelaide last November I had the opportunity to visit Jurlique's head office, factory and farm, as well as Udder Delights which is owned by Japanese dairy manufacturer SNOW BRAND.

In October, the South Australian government welcomed Mr. IBARAGI Ryuta, Governor of Okayama prefecture, who visited the Tonsley Innovation District and learnt about the energy sector in the

state. The South Australia-Okayama sister-state relationship is very strong, marking 30 years of friendship last year.

We are also looking forward to 2029 when the Japanese MMX mission will land a capsule with Martian moon samples in the South Australian outback.

I made a visit to Tasmania last November to see the Save the Devil Research Facility in Cressey. Here I had the chance to meet the Tasmanian Devils that arrived at Tama Zoological Park in Tokyo this month as part of the Tasmanian Devil Ambassador Program. I hope this will encourage more Japanese tourists to visit Tasmania when they come to Australia!

The Umitaka Maru research vessel from the Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology also visited Hobart from the 7th-9th February. Their visit to Antarctica was very successful and we hope for the continued success of their research in years to come.

We are fortunate to once again have Hida Beef for you to try tonight, as well as beautiful strawberries from Gifu Prefecture, which I know have become a favourite of our guests. These are both thanks to the generosity of Mr. FURUTA Hajime, Governor of Gifu Prefecture.

I have now been in Melbourne for three years. I hope to convince Tokyo to let me stay here long enough to host this reception again next year; if so, I can return to Japan by joining George in the yacht race!

It is great to see so many people I know as well as some new faces. I will try to say a quick hello to everyone throughout the night while you're enjoying the hospitality.

Thank you.

**Please note that some parts of the speech were omitted on the night.*