6 November

Record of Exchange as the Consul-General of Japan in Sydney (Edition 16)
Looking back at the history of Japan-Australia relations (1976-1985)

In the edition 14 of this Record of Exchange, I reported on the gala dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Japan and Australia held in Canberra in June, where I joined people from various fields to commemorate the close Japan-Australia relationship that has developed over the past half-century.

While "half a century" is a simple phrase, I believe that the current relationship, known as a "Special Strategic Partnership" , is the result of various layered exchanges that have accumulated over time. Although my stay in Australia has been around two years, I would like to reflect on these various exchanges, in part as a way to further my own understanding. Since many people have already written in detail about the history of bilateral relations in various fields, I will rather arbitrarily divide the past half-century into decades and, albeit through a somewhat Sydney-centric lens, review the overall bilateral relationship from the perspective of our economic relationship and people-to-people exchanges. Please note that this is less a record of my own exchanges and more my personal views on exchanges between Japan and Australia. I understand that there may be many differing views, and I would be grateful if you could share those perspectives, using this newsletter as a starting point.

Before looking back at the first ten years, I would like to review the bilateral relationship at the time the Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Australia and Japan was signed on 16 June 1976.

The Japan-Australia Commerce Agreement was signed in 1957, approximately 20 years before the signing of the Basic Treaty, and bilateral trade, including wool, resumed in earnest. In the 1960s, exports such as coal, iron ore, beef, and sugar from Australia expanded, and exports such as automobiles from Japan increased, developing into a relationship called "mutually complementary".

However, in the 1970s, due to the oil crisis and other factors, Japan's rapid economic growth slowed down, and movements began to emerge to curb imports of iron ore, beef, and sugar from Australia, bringing trade relations to a standstill. In the previous Record of Exchange, I mentioned that Foreign Minister Penny Wong stated in her speech at the gala dinner that it was realised that expanding the relationship required more than trade and that there was a need to deepen friendly relations, and so it was that when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam visited Nara in 1973, he proposed the idea of a treaty that would later become the Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. I believe

this proposal was based on this background. The Foreign Minister continued that in 1976, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser from the Liberal Party succeeded Labor Prime Minister Whitlam and signed the treaty, which is a testament to the “enduring bipartisan support” for the bilateral relationship. It was against this backdrop that the Japan-Australia Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed in order to view the economic relations between the two countries from a longer-term perspective and to promote the development of relations in areas beyond trade. Furthermore, Prime Minister Whitlam's visit to Nara served as the impetus for negotiations, and the treaty is also known as the “Nippon-Australia Relations Agreement”. Using the acronym NARA, it is also called the NARA Treaty, and from now on, I will refer to it as the NARA Treaty.



Prime Minister Whitlam’s visit to Nara Prefecture

(Image: National Archives of Australia)



The Signing of the NARA Treaty

Now, for the first decade from 1976 to 1985, which is the main topic.

First, regarding bilateral relations, which overlap with economic relations, trade issues were resolved with the settlement of the beef import quota dispute in 1977 and the agreement on the revision of the long-term sugar export agreement. In 1980, Prime Minister Ohira of Japan visited Australia, and Japan and Australia agreed to promote the Pacific Basin Cooperation Concept. Also, the Working Holiday Visa program started that year.



Prime Minister Ohira met with Prime Minister Fraser

（Image: The Masayoshi Ohira Foundation）

In terms of economic relations, after the 1973 oil crisis, awareness of stable resource procurement increased in Japan, so Japanese companies deepened their cooperation not only in purchasing iron ore and coal from Australia, but also in capital participation in iron ore and coal development projects and in the construction of port and railway infrastructure necessary for development. Also over these ten years, Japanese electronics manufacturers significantly increased their presence in Australia. However, once the entry of Japanese electrical products was in full swing, dissatisfaction began to emerge from Australian labour unions that Australia was importing large quantities of industrial products from Japan and only exporting raw materials. As a result, Japanese companies established sales companies, developed service networks, and promoted partial local assembly in Australia. This allowed Japanese companies to gain the trust of Australian consumers, and in the 1980s, they also gained a reputation for high quality, high reliability, and advanced technology. Japanese companies built an image as partners in resource development and as suppliers of highly reliable, advanced products.

In terms of exchanges, in May 1976, the Australia-Japan Foundation, which had been prepared concurrently with the negotiation of the NARA Treaty, was established as an Australian government agency with the aim of strengthening human and inter-organisational exchanges in fields such as the arts, media, education, business, science and technology, and sports. In 1978, the Japan Foundation established an Australian office in Canberra (it moved to Sydney in 1988). Furthermore, in 1979, a Japanese garden designed by Japanese landscape architect Ken Nakajima was constructed in Cowra, where Japanese prisoners of war and others were interned during World War II. Incidentally, this garden was later expanded and is now one of the largest Japanese gardens in the Southern Hemisphere. In 1980, Sydney City and Nagoya City, and in 1984, the NSW State and Tokyo Metropolitan Governments formed sister city affiliations, and thereafter, the number of sister city affiliations increased dramatically. Additionally, in 1983, the Japan Club of Sydney was established, primarily by Japanese residents living permanently in Australia.



The Signing Ceremony of the MoU between Nagoya and Sydney

(Image: Nagoya City)



The Signing Ceremony for the sister city relationship between Tokyo and NSW

(Image: Tokyo Metropolitan Government)

To summarise the development of relations over these ten years, 1976 to 1985, in terms of the overall bilateral relationship, we first worked to stabilise trade relations, and at the same time, we diversified cooperation in order to make the trade-centred complementary relationship more on a lasting basis. And I believe this was a period when we began to consider expanding the cooperation between the two countries beyond the bilateral level to the Asia-Pacific region. In terms of the economy, Japanese companies increased their presence in the Australian consumer market and built high trust in their products, which I believe made the presence of Japanese companies feel more familiar. Furthermore, in terms of exchange, as interest in Asia grew due to the Whitlam Labor government's Asia-focused policy, interest in the Japanese language also increased, leading to an expansion of youth exchanges and sister city affiliations.

I believe these ten years can be described as a decade in which bilateral relations were reinforced and the expansion of exchange areas truly began.



Cowra Japanese Garden

From 1986 onwards, I would like to look back on this in future Records of Exchange.