

Address to Parliament, House of Representatives,
Parliament House
By the Hon. Tony Abbott, Prime Minister of Australia

Tuesday, 8 July 2014
Parliament House, Canberra

Madam Speaker, Mr President, on this historic occasion, today we welcome to this Parliament a great friend of Australia, the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe.

Leaders from the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Canada, Indonesia and New Zealand have addressed both houses of the Australian Parliament. It is fitting that we should now hear from the Prime Minister of Japan, in recognition of our special relationship – built on shared interests and common values: democracy, human rights, the rule of law, more open markets and freer trade.

Madam Speaker, during one of our parliament's early debates, Prime Minister Deakin noted the "high ability...inexhaustible energy...(and) endurance" of the Japanese people that he said "made them such competitors". At some times, it's true, Australians have not felt as kindly towards Japan as we now do but we have never ever underestimated the quality and capacity of the Japanese people.

Even at the height of World War II, Australia gave the Japanese submariners killed in the attack on Sydney full military honours. Admiral Muirhead-Gould said of them: "theirs was a courage which is not the property or the tradition or the heritage of any one nation...but was patriotism of a very high order".

We admired the skill and the sense of honour that they brought to their task although we disagreed with what they did. Perhaps we grasped, even then, that with a change of heart the fiercest of opponents could be the best of friends.

Because just 12 years after World War II, Japan's Prime Minister Kishi, Prime Minister Abe's grandfather, visited Australia, and paid his respects to Australia's war dead at the War Memorial in Canberra as you, Prime Minister, have done yourself today. Prime Minister Kishi also signed the commerce treaty between Australia and Japan which helped to spawn the iron ore and coal industries that have done so much for both our countries.

Prime Ministers Menzies and Kishi, allowed history to be their teacher not their master; and, in so doing, provided a lesson in magnanimity for all times and for all peoples.

Madam Speaker, since 1957, Australian coal, iron ore and gas has powered Japan's prosperity; and Japanese cars, consumer goods and electronics have transformed Australians' lives. Australians are grateful for the Japanese trade and Japanese investment that has helped to build our modern prosperity. Above all, we appreciate the mutual respect and trust that has underpinned the commercial relationship.

Later today, Prime Minister Abe and I will sign the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement, a new and perhaps equally historic agreement to further liberalise trade between our countries. This is the first free trade agreement that Japan has made with a major developed economy.

For Japan, it means even better access for its manufactured goods. For Australia, it means better access for our beef, dairy, wine, horticulture, and grain products. For everyone, everywhere, it means that two significant countries are prepared to put their hopes above their fears and declare their confidence in the future.

Freer trade means more efficiency; more efficiency means more wealth; and more wealth means more jobs. This is the message that both Japan and Australia will bring to the G20 leaders' meeting in Brisbane in November: Freer trade means more economic growth and more economic growth means more prosperous people and fairer societies.

Both Australia and Japan are serious about boosting economic growth:

Australia through lower taxes, less regulation and through shifting spending from short-term consumption to long-term investment; Japan, with the third arrow of Abe-nomics, through less regulated health care, greater female participation, openness to foreign investment and better corporate governance.

Madam Speaker, because it takes rare courage to challenge entrenched ideas, even ideas that are holding your country back, Prime Minister Abe is making his mark on history.

Also on this visit, our two countries will conclude an agreement on the transfer of defence equipment and technology, similar to the agreements that Japan already has with the United States and the United Kingdom.

For decades now, Japan has been an exemplary international citizen. So Australia welcomes Japan's recent decision to be a more capable strategic partner in our region. I stress, ours is not a partnership against anyone; it's a partnership for peace, for prosperity and for the rule of law.

Our objective is engagement and we both welcome the greater trust and openness in our region that's exemplified by China's participation in this year's RimPac naval exercises.

Madam Speaker, Australia and Japan are approaching the 100th anniversary of the first significant occasion when our two countries worked together. The Japanese cruiser, Ibuki, helped to escort the 1914 ANZAC convoy to the Middle East and I am grateful that a Japanese warship will be present for the centenary event in Albany later this year.

More recently, Australian soldiers worked together with Japanese engineers to rebuild war-torn Iraq and I'm pleased to say, Madam Speaker, that the Australian commander in that mission, former Brigadier Andrew Nikolic, is now the Member for Bass in this Parliament! Madam Speaker, under Prime Minister Gillard, Australia was one of the first countries to dispatch assistance to Japan after the devastating 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

This, Madam Speaker, is the Australian way. We are true to our word; we threaten no one; we are an utterly reliable partner; and we go out of our way to help when trouble strikes: We helped Indonesia after the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Philippines after typhoon Haiyan and the search for flight MH370 which saw Japanese, Korean and Chinese aviators operating together from an Australian base to try to solve the greatest mystery of our time.

It was Prime Minister Chifley who spoke of a “light on the hill”: to work for the betterment of mankind, not just here but wherever we can lend a helping hand.

Australia is at the service of the wider world: as an affordable energy superpower, as a plentiful supplier of good food, and as a safe place to get the best and most affordable education. We hope that all the countries of our region will look to us to provide the energy security, the resources security and the food security that all seek.

Over the past two generations, Australian resources have helped to drive the economic miracles of Japan, of Korea and, most spectacularly of all, China.

What’s happened in Asia over the past 50 years is a transformation unparalleled in human history. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted from poverty into the middle class. It is the greatest and the swiftest advance in human welfare of all time.

Great credit belongs to the people and the governments of Asia but Australia is proud to have played our part. We should also be grateful to the United States for its work to guarantee the peace and stability that has made this progress possible.

Now Madam Speaker, the rest of the world has watched these marvels with awe and admiration. It’s the reason these times have already been dubbed the “Asian century”.

But we can’t take a better future for granted; for all the opportunities we

have, success still has to be earned. It would be a tragedy for everyone and a disaster for us were these achievements to be put at risk and history teaches us that issues between nations should be resolved peacefully in accordance with international law because the alternative is in no one's best long term interests. The lesson of the last century is that the countries of our region will all advance together or none of us will advance at all.

Prime Minister Howard frequently said that Australia did not have to choose between our history and our geography. My version of this has been to say that you don't win new friends by losing old ones. This Government is determined to improve all Australia's friendships by focusing on the things we have in common.

Australia and Japan have forged one of the world's firmest friendships and most practical of partnerships. But it wasn't always thus. Our partnership began from the ashes of the most destructive war in history because our peoples and our leaders have consistently refused to let the past blight the future.

Every country's situation is different, of course, but what a compelling example our two nations have provided of what is possible when we are all our best selves.

Madam Speaker, we are honoured to have Prime Minister Abe in our Parliament today – thrilled and honoured, and we all look forward to his address.

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