

Today I am honoured to welcome you here to join me in celebrating the birthday of His Majesty the Emperor. It gives me great pleasure to celebrate such an auspicious occasion together with you all. Today February 23rd His Majesty the Emperor celebrates his 64th birthday. During the past year, as the symbol of state, as the symbol of the unity of the people of Japan, His Majesty the Emperor and Her Majesty the Empress have been dedicated to the country and its people on a daily basis and sharing their joys and sorrows. Since the Noto Peninsula Earthquake that occurred on New Year's Day this year, Their Majesties have been caring for the victims and have been devoted to the earliest possible recovery. Immediately after the earthquake, we received warm messages of sympathy and generous offers of assistance from the people of Ireland. I would like to once again express my heartfelt gratitude.

One year has passed since I arrived in Ireland. I immediately recognised there are so many people, both Irish and Japanese, devoted to strengthening the relationship between Japan and Ireland. Today on this auspicious occasion I would like to thank all of them for their valuable contribution. I visited many counties, not only to meet with the Japanese community, but also to meet with Irish businesspeople, academics, teachers, students and local authorities so that they can feel Japan closer to them. Today I have the pleasure to welcome representatives from different counties I visited, Kerry, Roscommon, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Cork, Wexford, Waterford and of course Dun Laoghaire, the city of my residence.

I will proceed to a rapid overview of our bilateral relations. Since the visit of then Taoiseach Micheal Martin in 2022, our already excellent relations got a significant boost. It was accelerated by the visit of the Ceann Comhairle and the delegation of the parliamentary friendship group to Japan and of course by the visit of Minister Jack Chambers on Saint Patrick's Day. It was followed by the visit of Minister Paschal Donohoe as the President of Eurogroup when Japan was the G7 chair last year.

Last year the delegation led by the Ceann Comhairle visited Hiroshima. This year, the Mayor of Hiroshima will visit Ireland in October. It will be the first visit of the Mayor of Hiroshima to Ireland. The Mayor of Hiroshima is a symbol of peace. With the coming of the Mayor of Hiroshima, Ireland will become a platform to deliver the peace message of Hiroshima. I am looking forward to his visit and it will be a good occasion and opportunity to collaborate with universities that have ideas to prepare well for his visit.

Next, on our economies.

In comparison to 2020, there is an increase of 40% in our trade in both directions, in goods and services. The amount of our trade is now €23 billion. The presence of Japanese companies is increasing accordingly. We can count more than 120 in Ireland. FDI from Japan continues to be very active. Last year we have registered eight new investments. Japan is now, according to the statistics office, the fifth largest investor to Ireland.

The pharmaceutical giant Astellas will have a new factory in Tralee, Co. Kerry. A “groundbreaking ceremony” will be held at the end of March. We also welcome the investment from Ireland to Japan. Japan is now an attractive production base. At the end of this month, many start-ups from Ireland will visit Japan along with the Irish Tech Hub Network. Their intention is to open an office to do business in Japan.

Rapidly, on education.

First of all, I would like to thank the boys and girls of Saint Cronan’s Senior National School for their wonderful choir.

Since my arrival here, I visited a lot of primary schools, secondary schools teaching Japanese. Ireland is number one in Europe in terms of Japanese language learners per capita. There are eleven primary schools and 35 secondary schools teaching Japanese. In some of the secondary schools you can see Japanese as a Leaving Cert subject. I would like to commend the efforts by the PPLI, by the association of Japanese Language Teachers and the principals and the teachers of the schools.

The exchange between those schools teaching Japanese and Japanese schools was started. Today, Japanese high school students are visiting a secondary school teaching Japanese. They will join us to celebrate the birthday of His Majesty together. On higher education, I welcome the attendance of DCU, Galway, TCD, UCD, UCC, Limerick, Maynooth and SETU. We do have a long tradition of exchange with those universities.

I would like to draw your attention to the new development with UCC and Japan. The digital archive of one of the biggest libraries in the world, which is the Japanese Diet Library, was connected to UCC Library last year. UCC is now among the three universities in Europe connected to this huge digital archive. One is in Belgium, the other one is in Spain. According to what I heard from UCC, the visitors to UCC from neighbouring countries are increasing because the UCC library is now connected to the treasure of the Japanese Diet Library.

Finally on culture.

You might know that one of my agendas is to raise the profile of one Irishman who is well known in Japan, but almost nobody knows him in Ireland. His name is Lafcadio Hearn. He was a writer, a journalist who taught the Western world about Japan, in the late 19th century. He married a Japanese woman and got Japanese citizenship under the name of Koizumi Yakumo. The digital archive that I mentioned, has more than 200 manuscripts of Lafcadio Hearn that can be now very easily consumed through the UCC library.

Talking about Lafcadio Hearn, he spent his childhood summers in Waterford in a place called Tramore. In Tramore there is a garden called Lafcadio Hearn Gardens with a beautiful Japanese garden inside. They will celebrate their tenth anniversary next year. Their cultural centre will be expanded on this occasion. It will become, in my eyes, a kind of Japanese cultural centre in Waterford. I recommend visiting this Garden, especially for school excursions.

I would like to touch upon on the Ireland Japan Association. This is an important platform to connect business, culture and education. Last year for their annual dinner, we had the honour to have the presence of Minister Chambers. We very much appreciated his presence. The IJA is now collaborating very closely with the Ireland Japan Chamber of Commerce. Their activities are piling up. I would like to commend the efforts of all the people who participate on that. They help me to raise the profile of Lafcadio Hearn as well.

The spring will come and when talking about spring, April is the month for Experience Japan, the biggest Japanese cultural event in Ireland. The turnout is amazing. Usually 20,000 in one day. This year it will be held on 28 April. Last year we had the presence of Minister Chambers. Thank you very much for your attendance.

April is also the time for the Japanese Film Festival. This year the organisers decided to screen in Dublin, Bray, Galway, Dundalk, Waterford, Limerick, Wexford, Cork and Sligo. There will be lots of opportunities to see the films even if you miss them in Dublin. Thank you, Access Cinema, for finding very nice films from Japan.

To close my remarks, next year 2025 will be an exciting year for Japan and Ireland. First, the opening of Ireland House in Tokyo and second, Osaka Kansai World Expo and Ireland

will have its own pavilion. We expect the visit of “somebody” from Ireland to Japan for the opening of those two important investments from Ireland.

I have displayed the goods and pictures of my home prefecture Toyama.
There are so many beautiful things. Please have a look. I hope you will appreciate them.