

**Speech for the 2019 Rugby World Cup Reception
at the Ambassador's Residence
by H.E. Ambassador Hiroyasu Kobayashi
on Thursday, 28 March 2019**

Kia Ora Koutou and welcome,

I am honoured to be here this evening among so many notable New Zealand supporters of rugby, together looking forward to the fast-approaching 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. I hope you will enjoy your time here tonight, and talk with some old and new friends about our favourite sport, rugby.

To start, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to our honourable New Zealand Parliament members present here today; Rt Hon Trevor Mallard, Speaker of the House, as well as Hon Mark Mitchell and Hon Greg O'Connor.

This year, many New Zealand Members of Parliament and Ministers will visit Japan to participate in the Parliamentary Rugby World Cup, or just to attend the Rugby World Cup itself, which provides multiple chances for our two countries to sit down together and discuss our mutual futures. This is the kind of opportunity afforded only by such large-scale international events, and I am truly honoured to be able to help facilitate it.

Talking about the bilateral collaboration, the sister city relationship plays a large part in cross-cultural exchange. Wellington's sister city relationship with Sakai-city in Osaka Prefecture celebrates a significant milestone this year: 25 years of exchanging sport, business, culture, and much more. Let me extend a warm welcome to Deputy Mayor Jill Day, as well as other councillors and officials here this evening. I look

forward to working with them all to continue nurturing this fruitful trans-pacific friendship.

Coming back to rugby, this is Japan's, and indeed, Asia's, first time to host the Rugby World Cup. Let me remind you that Japan has been ever-present in the Rugby World Cup, competing in all 8 tournaments since 1987. I think that is very impressive, so impressive that I will now skip over the statistics of our points totals and records for those matches!

Firstly, speaking of records, Japan made a sparkling debut of their first match against New Zealand during the Rugby World Cup 1995, with an amazing final score of Japan 17 to NZ 145, a score difference of 128. This result helped to form several incredible records! New Zealand's highest-ever score, New Zealand's biggest-ever win over any team, and... Japan's largest-ever defeat. We are hoping that these records remain standing for a long time!

However, with each encounter between our two countries, within and outside of the World Cup, Japan has been improving their games, bit by bit. Although, as I said, the first memorable match ended with a large margin of 128 points, their next clash resulted in a difference of only 76 points—and merely 2 years later, that the gap was narrowed to 48 points. Last year, Japan and New Zealand ended their test match with a final score of 31 to 69, a gap of only 38 points. This year, the Brave Blossoms will have home team advantage and the remarkable energy of the Japanese fans all around them. I think you all remember the historic upset Japan caused against South Africa in the last World Cup. Perhaps, if we pray hard enough, another, even bigger miracle might emerge, who knows!?

But, speaking honestly, Japan owes much to New Zealand especially in rugby. Indeed, throughout our history, the Japanese national team has been assisted by our New Zealand friends in many ways; including through coaches, matches, players, and clinics. Kiwis have never shied away from sharing their knowledge and skill. It is always heartening to see that exchange of abilities and culture via sport, as our two countries have such a strong history of cross-cultural communication as Strategic Cooperative Partners. Or... perhaps, New Zealanders feel bad about that first 128 point difference, too.

In all seriousness, it is my hope that this Rugby World Cup, Japan can give something back to New Zealand—and the world. When teams from all over the world visit Japan this year, Japan will make full use of its famous hospitality, and treat the visitors to incredible scenery, delicious food, intriguing culture, and the hottest, sweatiest summer they can possibly imagine. We will surely do our best to make sure that each and every match goes off without issue, and that everyone, from the fans to the players, have an excellent experience during their visit to our beautiful country.

Finally, the excitement does not have to stop after the 2019 Rugby World Cup. Japan will host the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020, the Kansai World Masters Games in 2021, and the Osaka World Expo in 2025. Please make sure you save your Frequent Flyer Miles this year for your next trip over. For many of those attending, this may be your first visit to Japan, but I sincerely hope that it won't be your last.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much once again for coming this evening, and please, enjoy the drinks, especially sake and the Japanese food buffet.

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.