

## Visit Report

### **Australian Political Exchange Council 30th Delegation to Japan 11 to 18 October 2025**



Delegates with the Hon. Akiko Ikuina, Parliamentary Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs – Tokyo, 14 October 2025

### **Delegation Members**

**Sally Sitou MP**

Federal Member for Reid  
Australian Labor Party

**Senator Leah Blyth**

Senator for South Australia  
Liberal Party of Australia

**Ash Ambihaipahar MP**

Federal Member for Barton  
Australian Labor Party

*Accompanied by Connor Costello  
Representative of the Australian Political Exchange Council*

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## Executive Summary

The Australian-Japan Young Political Leaders Exchange Program took place from 11 to 18 October 2025. The delegation comprised of the Federal Member for Reid Sally Sitou, Federal Member for Barton Ash Ambihapahar and Senator for South Australia Leah Blyth. Connor Costello accompanied the delegation as the representative of the Australian Political Exchange Council.

The visit to Japan coincided with a fascinating time in Japanese politics, as the parliament was considering who would be the next Prime Minister of Japan. Sanae Takaichi was the favoured parliamentarian for the role and shortly after our delegation left Japan she did go on to become the Prime Minister - making history as the first female Prime Minister of Japan.

The delegation visit was a great opportunity to strengthen bilateral ties between Australia and Japan through political dialogue, cultural exchange, and engagement on key policy areas including women's leadership, housing innovation and urban planning, and decarbonisation. Through high-level meetings and site visits, we deepened our knowledge of Japan's political, economic and cultural environment.

Australia and Japan share one of the most comprehensive partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, anchored in shared democratic values, economic interdependence, and a commitment to regional stability. Japan is one of Australia's largest trading partners, particularly in resources and energy. Australia supplies Japan with critical commodities such as natural gas, critical minerals and iron ore, ensuring Japan's energy security. Both nations are collaborating on clean energy transition projects, to meet decarbonisation goals and strengthen future energy resilience.

The Australia-Japan partnership is a cornerstone of regional stability, combining economic strength with shared security objectives. Collaboration on energy security and defence ensures resilience against global disruptions while advancing sustainable growth and peace in the Indo-Pacific. Australia's decision to choose an upgraded version of Japan's Mogami-class frigate for its new general-purpose frigates further strengthened the strategic relationship between Australia and Japan.

On a personal level, meetings with parliamentarians in Japan were genuinely enjoyable and eye-opening, providing a valuable opportunity to share common challenges and opportunities, as well as learn from each other's experiences.

## Report

### Sunday 12 October – Osaka

Our first stop was Osaka, we were struck by the efficiency of the city's transport systems and the friendliness of its people. Osaka is famously known as the "kitchen of Japan" and we soon understood why. We sampled a variety of local specialties such as takoyaki, okonomiyaki and kushikatsu. We were impressed by Osaka's dynamic atmosphere and the warmth of its residents.

#### *Visit to the World Expo 2025 Osaka*

We had the opportunity to visit the World Expo 2025 Osaka. It was an extraordinary showcase of global innovation, sustainability, and cooperation. The Expo grounds were expansive and beautifully designed. At the Japanese Pavilion, we experienced Japan's vision for a sustainable future through interactive exhibits that combined technology with traditional wisdom. The displays highlighted how Japanese culture values harmony between people, nature, and progress.

The Australian Pavilion reflected our nation's creativity and leadership in sustainability. It emphasised Australia's strengths in renewable energy, natural environment and celebrated First Nations Australians. We learnt the Australian Pavilion had hosted almost 3 million visitors over the six months duration of the expo and hosted more than 140 events in their event spaces. It is a tribute to the Expo team and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for managing such a successful project. They helped to create ongoing trade opportunities by connecting Australian businesses with international buyers, as well as promote Australia as a top tourist destination.

We also had the opportunity to engage with Japan Prefecture representatives from Osaka and engaged in discussions regarding renewable and housing in Osaka.

The Singapore Pavilion focused on urban sustainability and smart design. It showcased how Singapore integrates technology, greenery and community-focused planning to build resilient and liveable cities.

The Gas Pavilion featured groundbreaking technology that converts water into hydrogen. The experience explained how hydrogen can serve as a clean and renewable energy source and how this innovation aligns with global efforts to achieve carbon neutrality. Specifically, it was catered for young participants to understand the technology. The exhibit was both informative and inspiring, underscoring the importance of science and technology in shaping a sustainable energy future.

### Monday 13 October – Kyoto

During our visit to Kyoto, we had the opportunity to experience Japan's cultural heart through its historic districts, sacred temples and traditional customs. Kyoto's balance of history and harmony offered a profound appreciation of how Japanese culture preserves its heritage while embracing modern life.

#### *Exploration of Kyoto's Historic Areas*

Our journey began in Motoyoshichō, where we were immersed in the charm of traditional Kyoto streetscapes. The preserved wooden townhouses, narrow lanes and intimate local shops offered a glimpse into the city's old-world atmosphere. We also visited the temple in Shimokawarachō, where the tranquil environment invited reflection and a sense of spiritual calm. The temple's architecture, gardens and stone pathways illustrated Japan's deep respect for nature and craftsmanship. It was a reminder of how spirituality in Japan is often expressed through attention to detail and harmony with the natural world.

### *Visits to Iconic Temples*

Among the most memorable experiences was our visit to Kiyomizu-dera, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The temple's magnificent wooden terrace, overlooking the city. We also visited the Golden Pavilion, known as Kinkaku-ji, one of Japan's most famous landmarks. The pavilion, covered in gold leaf and perfectly reflected in the surrounding pond, embodied the ideals of harmony and aesthetic perfection. The peaceful garden surrounding the temple further deepened our appreciation for Japan's approach to landscape design, where every element contributes to a sense of serenity and contemplation.

### *Traditional Tea Ceremony Experience*

A highlight of our time in Kyoto was participating in a traditional tea ceremony at the Daiou-in Temple in Hanazono Myōshinjichō. Guided by an experienced tea master, we learned about the ritual's significance, which emphasises mindfulness, respect and tranquillity. The ceremony was an intimate and graceful experience. We also viewed the Temple's traditional wallpaper paintings and artworks, some of which were over 200 years old.

### *Shinkansen*

We caught the Shinkansen from Kyoto to Tokyo and were impressed by the efficiency, frequency, punctuality and convenience of the trip. It highlighted the transformative role of high-speed rail in connecting regions. The Shinkansen serves as a model for how investment in modern transport systems can drive productivity, reduce environmental impact, and enhance quality of life.

## **Tuesday 14 October – Tokyo**

### *Briefing by Australia's Ambassador to Japan, H.E. Justin Hayhurst*

Ambassador Hayhurst and senior embassy staff provided an in-depth overview of the Special Strategic Partnership between Australia and Japan. The discussion highlighted the strength of bilateral cooperation across political, economic, and defence domains, emphasising shared strategic interests in maintaining regional stability and advancing economic resilience.

### *Women's Leadership Roundtable hosted by Ambassador Hayhurst*

Ambassador Hayhurst hosted a fantastic roundtable for female parliamentarians from both Australia and Japan, including representatives from Japan's Liberal Democratic Party and Constitutional Democratic Party. The roundtable provided a platform to discuss female representation, structural barriers, and gender equality in leadership. It was a particularly timely discussion given the broader political context in Japan around the potential of Japan's first female Prime Minister. The discussions also focused on the challenges with the political discourse on social media platforms and Australia's reforms around social media delays for children under 16 years.

### *Lunch hosted by the Japanese Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs*

Lunch provided for a warm setting to continue conversations on bilateral cooperation and gender empowerment. We explored discussions around changes in the Japanese political landscape and Australia's strategic relationship with Japan.

### *Meeting at Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA)*

The meeting at JIIA - a leading think tank on foreign affairs and security - with the President and Executive Director of the organisation focused on regional security dynamics, the evolving strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, and opportunities for Australia and Japan to deepen collaboration on defence and economic resilience.

### **Wednesday 15 October – Tokyo**

#### *Japan's Parliament (National Diet)*

Japan's National Diet Building is an iconic symbol of Japan's democratic governance and legislative process. It was a very impressive building. During our visit, we were struck by its impressive architecture and the sense of history embedded within its chambers.

#### *Dinner with the Ambassador Hayhurst and senior staff*

Discussion at the Australian Embassy dinner focused on opportunities to further strengthen Australia's relationship with Japan across key areas, including trade diversification, energy collaboration, and security partnerships.

We explored ways to deepen political exchanges, as well as strategies to support Australian businesses in accessing the Japanese market. The Ambassador emphasised Japan's interest in renewable energy and critical minerals, energy and food security and strengthening defence and strategic ties. This engagement underscored the vital role our diplomats and diplomatic networks play in advancing shared interests and fostering long-term bilateral ties.

### **Thursday 16 October – Tokyo**

#### *Visit to Sekisui House Factory, Tokyo*

We had the opportunity to tour the Sekisui House Factory and learn about Japan's advanced approach to sustainable housing, precision manufacturing, and environmentally responsible construction. The visit provided valuable insight into how innovation and technology can support efficient building processes while maintaining a strong focus on quality, safety and sustainability.

Sekisui House is one of Japan's leading residential construction companies and is internationally recognised for its commitment to sustainable development and innovation in homebuilding.

At the beginning of the tour, company representatives provided an overview of Sekisui House's history, its research and development achievements and its guiding principles. The presentation highlighted the company's emphasis on carbon neutrality, energy efficiency and the use of smart technology in housing design.

We were then taken on a factory tour, which demonstrated the high level of precision and quality control that underpins Sekisui House's operations. We observed how advanced manufacturing techniques are used to produce modular housing components that can be assembled quickly and efficiently on-site. The process ensures consistency in quality while significantly reducing waste and construction time.

Each section of the factory was designed for maximum efficiency and safety. Automated machinery and robotics were integrated seamlessly with skilled human supervision and quality control. The company's commitment to safety, both for workers and for future residents, was evident in its rigorous testing and inspection processes. The factory also showcased the use of sustainable materials, energy-saving technologies and systems that improve thermal insulation and energy efficiency.

#### *Visit to JR Central Rail Company, Tokyo*

During our visit to the JR Central Rail Company in Tokyo, we gained insights into one of the most advanced and efficient rail systems in the world. The visit provided a deeper understanding of Japan's leadership in transportation technology, safety and operational excellence. It also demonstrated how Japan's railway system continues to set global standards for punctuality, reliability and passenger service.

Central Japan Railway Company, commonly known as JR Central, is a major operator within Japan's extensive rail network. It is best known for managing the Tokaido Shinkansen, which connects Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka, serving as one of the busiest and most important high-speed rail lines in the world.

Company representatives began the visit by introducing JR Central's history, organisational structure and guiding principles. We learned that the company's mission is to deliver safe, efficient, and environmentally sustainable rail transport while continuously improving customer experience through innovation and technology.

During the tour, we observed JR Central's operations and control systems that coordinate thousands of train movements each day with remarkable precision. The company's operational headquarters featured advanced digital monitoring systems that track train locations, speed, and scheduling in real time. This technology ensures not only the punctuality for which Japan's railways are world-renowned but also the safety of millions of passengers.

Staff provided an overview of the company's maintenance and inspection processes. We learned how trains undergo daily safety checks and how track conditions are monitored using specialised equipment to detect even the smallest irregularities. The emphasis on preventative maintenance reflects the company's strong safety culture and commitment to continuous improvement.

We also observed how JR Central integrates customer-focused innovations such as digital ticketing, real-time information systems, and accessibility features for passengers with mobility needs. These advancements demonstrate the company's dedication to improving passenger convenience and inclusivity.

#### **Friday 17 October – Tokyo**

##### *Visit to Nippon Steel Kimitsu Factory*

During our visit to the Nippon Steel Kimitsu Factory, we had the opportunity to observe one of Japan's most advanced and globally significant steel manufacturing facilities. The visit provided valuable insight into Japan's industrial innovation, its commitment to quality, and its leadership in sustainable and efficient production practices. The experience highlighted how Japan's manufacturing sector integrates technology, safety and environmental responsibility to maintain international competitiveness.

Nippon Steel is one of the world's largest steel producers and a leader in advanced materials and technology. The Kimitsu Works, located in Chiba Prefecture, is one of the company's flagship plants and plays a critical role in supplying high-quality steel for infrastructure, construction, automotive and energy industries.

At the start of the tour, company representatives provided an overview of the factory's history, its production capacity, and its ongoing efforts to reduce carbon emissions through innovation. We were briefed on the plant's role in Japan's industrial development and its contribution to technological advancements in steelmaking.

The factory tour offered a detailed look at the steel production process from raw material handling to finished product. We observed how iron ore and coal are transformed through a series of precise and highly automated steps into high-grade steel. The scale of the facility was impressive, with large blast furnaces, continuous casting equipment and rolling mills operating in seamless coordination.

Safety and efficiency were central to every aspect of the operation. The use of advanced automation and digital monitoring systems ensures high productivity while maintaining strict safety standards.

We also observed how quality control is maintained at every stage. From temperature regulation in blast furnaces to the inspection of finished steel sheets, every step reflected a culture of accuracy and accountability.

A key component of the visit was learning about Nippon Steel's approach to sustainability and its contribution to Japan's environmental goals. The company is investing heavily in low-carbon and hydrogen-based steelmaking technologies to support the transition to carbon neutrality.

We were introduced to several research initiatives focused on reducing emissions through new materials and energy efficiency measures. The factory's environmental management systems include waste recycling, efficient water usage and the recovery of by-products for reuse in other industries. These initiatives demonstrate the company's commitment to circular economy principles.

## **Conclusion**

The delegation visit was a valuable opportunity for us to gain insights into Australia's relationship with one of our closest strategic partners, the visits, meetings and discussions gave us a deeper and richer understanding of Japan's economy, culture and politics.

We are grateful for the extraordinary support of Ms Kanako Shiga who was an excellent guide and source of information about Japan, we appreciated her willingness to share her knowledge and answer our many questions. We are also incredibly grateful to Connor Costello from the Australian Political Exchange Council who assisted us with good humour and cheer and was a great sounding board for guidance. They both made the trip a great success.

We also want to thank all the hosts, embassy staff, interpreters, and drivers who contributed in making the visit so meaningful.

The delegation was an opportunity to build genuine connections and learn from Japan's innovation and resilience. We saw the strengths and benefits of the Australia–Japan partnership first-hand. The conversations we shared on gender equality, energy transition, and regional security were informative and inspiring and will shape how we approach these challenges in the future. Experiencing Japan's culture and meeting its leaders reminded us of the power of collaboration and trust between nations.