

# Japan is a true friend of Canada and is now in great need

ROB WRIGHT

Ottawa Citizen

March 18, 2011

The images coming out of Japan are truly shocking: The initial impact of a huge earthquake, followed minutes later by the devastation of an enormous tsunami, and now the unfolding crisis at the nuclear reactors in Fukushima. Seen from half a world away here in Canada there is something almost surreal about the confluence of these tragic events. Unfortunately the situation is very real and the impact on Japan and the Japanese people is tragic. In times like this true friends come forward to help. It is encouraging, therefore, to see the outpouring of support from Canadians toward the people of Japan.

With all the attention paid to the emergence of China as a regional superpower it is easy to forget the importance of Japan to Canada and Canada to Japan. We are each other's closest neighbours across the North Pacific. For decades now Japan has been one of our two or three largest two-way trading partners and successful Japanese corporations have invested billions in the Canadian economy. Japanese tourists still make up a hugely important part of our tourism industry and Japan is a consistent democratic partner in the UN, the WTO, the G8 and many other international institutions.

Most importantly, contacts at the personal level between Japanese and Canadians are strong and continue to grow. The first Japanese immigrants came to Canada more than 100 years ago. Every year thousands of Japanese students come to Canada to see the country, to learn English and to attend our universities and every year hundreds of young Canadians travel to Japan, many to teach English to Japanese secondary students.

At the international level Japan has been one of the most generous and dependable contributors to the UN and to international relief. Japanese emergency teams were among the first foreign experts to arrive on the scene of the great Sichuan earthquake in Southwestern China in May 2008 that killed over 80,000 people and just last month Japanese experts travelled to Christchurch, New Zealand to assist in the recovery. Even before the earthquake, Japan had been struggling with its own internal economic and social problems. Although Japan is still a wealthy nation, with a per-capita income higher than in Canada, the economic boom years for Japan are long gone.

The government has for years been running huge, unsustainable fiscal deficits and Japan's debt to GDP ratio, at over 200 per cent, is the highest among developed countries. The population is aging, the birthrate is low and the Japanese are reluctant to increase immigration. Many young Japanese are dispirited by increasing unemployment and are unwilling to make the same lifelong commitment to work as did their parents.

However if there is one characteristic that exemplifies the Japanese it is resilience in the face of disaster. Even during this crisis observers have noted the calm and orderly responses of the Japanese people. They have been through crises before, both natural and man-made. This may be another historic moment in Japan's history when the people and government make the commitment to rebuild.

Now is the time for Canadians to show the compassion and support that will assist in this effort. Given the enormous scale of the current crisis, we may not be able to do much at this distance. But the mere fact that Canadians are expressing their concern, donating to agencies on the ground and simply reminding our Japanese friends that we support them through this crisis will help and will be remembered.

*Rob Wright was ambassador of Canada to Japan from 2001-2005. He served as ambassador to China 2005-2009.*