Canada and the JET Programme
– Saluting 30 Years of Success

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon, bonjour, konnichiwa. It is an honour for me to be invited to speak at today’s event celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, or JET, as it’s so much better known. In fact it’s so widely known as the JET Programme, I confess I initially had to look it up to make sure I had the extension of the acronym just right.

First and foremost, I would like to extend my congratulations to the Government of Japan for reaching this impressive milestone, and to commend in particular the lead Ministries and Agencies responsible for delivering such a successful programme

• Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication;
• The Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
• The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology;
• And the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR).

Now thirty years on, nearly two generations of JETs have taken part in this Programme, creating a worldwide network of talented individuals who have developed a deep understanding of and interest in Japan, including a disproportionately large share from Canada. Some Canadians, it seems, will go to great lengths to escape our harsh winter…By the way, that applies to our diplomats too.

I have just recently arrived in Japan as Canada’s Ambassador, and I am delighted to be here for reasons that are both personal, to return to the country where I spent nearly 8 years as a young child, and professional, to help advance our bilateral relationship at a time when they are so full of potential.

Indeed, if you will permit me this slight digression, strengthening Canada’s ties with Japan is a top priority for our Government, a message underscored by Prime Minister Trudeau’s decision to make Japan the destination of his first bilateral visit in Asia, which happened in May. He and Prime Minister Abe have now forged
a strong working relationship together, and have agreed to work towards strengthening our bilateral relations as a means of achieving greater prosperity and security for our citizens.

Critical to that effort, and this brings me back to the focus here today, is enhancing people-to-people ties, particularly amongst our youth because that’s the foundation for a closer relationship in any area—be it political, economic, commercial or cultural. These people-to-people links take many forms. In our case, it includes a wide range of friendship societies, twinned cities and academic partnerships, and a large and growing flow of tourists, students and working holiday-makers in both directions across the Pacific.

The JET Programme plays a vital role in stimulating youth mobility and people-to-people engagement between our countries, and as such is very valued highly by our Government. Prime Minister Trudeau was himself an educator by background, and he attaches such importance to increasing opportunities for today’s youth that he has appointed himself as his own Minister responsible for Youth. That is unprecedented in our political system, and underscores the priority of those issues for his Government.

During its 30-year run to date, the JET Programme has evolved from relatively humble origins—with four countries sending about 850 participants back in 1987—to the full-fledged operation that is today, boasting 40 participating countries sending nearly 5,000 individuals to every corner of this country. On a cumulative basis, as you heard some 65,000 participants have come through the JET programme to date, about two-thirds of whom have come from Canada and the United States.

But the numbers, frankly, only tell part of the story. Consider the impact that lies behind that. 65,000 future global leaders from around the world have now spent their formative years in this country, living and breathing the Japanese experience. They’ve helped broaden cultural understanding and strengthen language capacity while here, and they’ve taken back a life-long affinity for Japan that is now shaping a multitude of careers on every continent: as journalists, politicians, diplomats, academics and teachers, as well as authors, musicians and other performing artists. What a powerful global network this Programme has spawned!

So, as we see it, the JET Programme has been an unqualified success, a ‘win, win, win’—for the individuals themselves, for Japan and the communities as the hosts and for the participating countries including my own.

For the JET participants, the Programme provides an opportunity to live in a fascinating country and absorb its culture first-hand. Moreover, the work experience—whether as an Language Teacher or Coordinator of International Relations—generates highly marketable skills and often serves as a springboard to a successful career.
in many vocations. And former JETs here today exemplify this point.

From Japan’s standpoint, with the Government striving to globalize the outlook of its citizenry, the connections established through JET play an important role in exposing students and hosting communities to the world beyond Japan’s borders.

JET participants also make significant contributions in their local communities beyond the specific requirements of their jobs, whether through volunteer work or other types of support. As you have already heard earlier this morning, perhaps the most poignant has been in response to natural disasters. Again and again, in Kobe, in Tohoku, in Kumamoto, we have seen JETs in Japan raising money and awareness, and pitching in to help with recovery efforts in their hosting cities and towns. Former participants have also actively engaged back home. In the days immediately following the 3.11 disasters, JET alumni groups across Canada organized fundraising events and activities to support the affected region.

A striking feature of the JET Programme, and a key ingredient in its overall success, is the strong sense of community and shared identity that it fosters among participants. These are nurtured and sustained through all manner of alumni activities around the world. To take one example, just last week, the JET Alumni Association of Ottawa held its 25th anniversary celebration, reuniting former participants who are now in disparate fields but who retain a common bond through their experience and shared interest in Japan. Similar groups are active across Canada and of course, among the other participating countries around the world.

In looking back over the first 30 years, I would suggest that the JET Programme has proven itself to be an exceptionally far-sighted and wise investment in public diplomacy by the Japanese government.

At the same time, the Programme has also been of great value to the countries that have supplied the participants, perhaps none more so in proportionate terms than my own.

Canada is proud to be a longstanding supporter of the JET Programme. Our first cohort arrived in 1988. Since then, we’ve had approximately 9,000 Canadians take part in the Programme, including around 500 at the present time, which makes Canada the second-largest overall source of participants.

These ‘Can JETs’, as we call them, play a significant role in developing and enriching our bilateral relationship with Japan. The Programme provides a steady stream of talented young individuals who fan out across the country every year, often to relatively remote areas, from where they are in a position to convey knowledge and
understanding about Canada in their communities. This is important, as it shapes views and perceptions about our country for years to come.

We at the Embassy work closely with our cohorts every year, to remind them of the weight of the responsibility they implicitly carry, and to help prepare them for what lies ahead. To their credit, they have a very strong track record, and have helped cast our country in a favourable light. So I welcome this source of 'unofficial ambassadors', not with standing that they are all in a sense competing for my own job!

In fact, a number of former JETs have gone on to pursue formal careers in our diplomatic service. That is a natural fit for many, as the international experience and skillsets fostered by the JET Programme are exactly those that are in such high demand by foreign ministries around the world. I suspect we are not the only Embassy in Tokyo to count former JETs among its employees, and this is an attractive pool of talent that we will continue to draw on in future years (yes, that’s a hint to current participants here today).

To conclude, the JET Programme has gone from strength to strength during its first 30 years, and stands today as one of the world’s largest and most successful vehicles of its kind for promoting youth mobility and cultural understanding across borders. Looking ahead, I would expect that the Programme will continue to flourish, and adapt to changing times as needed; perhaps through the inclusion of new job streams where warranted. Fundamentally, though, the vision that led to its creation 30 years ago is as relevant today as it was then, if not more so.

So once again I salute the Government of Japan for all that has been achieved by the JET Programme over the past three decades, and I wish the participants from all countries continued success in the years ahead. I have no doubt that one day soon, the Ambassador that is invited to give a speech of this nature will himself or herself be a JET alumnus or alumnae.

Merci beaucoup, thank you very much, domo arigatou gozaimasu.