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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

CONDOLENCES

Japan Disaster

SPEECH

Wednesday, 23 March 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 23 March 2011 Page 150 Questioner Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (4.56 pm)—I rise to offer my support for the condolence motion regarding the Japanese earthquake. I rise with some degree of knowledge, having been in Japan when the quake actually struck. The best condolence I can give is to briefly share some of my 40-hour journey home, post the quake, because it speaks volumes for the courage, the tenacity and the great kindness of the Japanese people.

On that fateful day, 11 March 2011, I was in Kyoto in the morning and I bought a 400-year-old Japanese samurai sword from the Mihara province, a sword that for 10 generations samurai warriors had held, had lent on and had fought with. It was a sword that symbolised all that Japan was and is to be: a nation of great courage, of great inventiveness, of great entrepreneurialism and of tremendous spirit of community—everything that the samurai stood for and continue to stand for. Four hours after I bought that sword and was holding it in my hand, the shinkansen we were in travelling from Kyoto to Osaka and Tokyo ground to a sudden stop. It became apparent over the subsequent minutes, because we were still a fair way away—although my colleagues attest to the shaking on the train—that there had indeed been an earthquake.

The following minutes would outline the severity of the earthquake. We would later spend eight hours on our shinkansen, five hours of it stationary within 200 kilometres of Tokyo. Reports slowly came through over phones, mobile devices and tablets on board the train that a magnitude-9 quake had struck the main island of Japan. We later found out that the quake was so powerful that the island shifted eight feet—it actually moved eight feet towards the continental United States of America. NASA also tells us that the revolution of the world slowed by some 1.6 nanoseconds, which I am sure does not sound very much, but I can assure you that being on a tin-can shinkansen—to be somewhat flippant—when the earthquake and the aftershocks struck was certainly significant.

It was interesting that as I looked around at the 1½ thousand Japanese people on board the train, there was no sign of fear or confusion. Some commentators have called it a calm chaos. I simply call it a calm and stoic demeanour. There was no sense of distress. The only difference between the Japanese people I saw going to Kyoto on the train and the Japanese people I saw coming back was that on the way back there was a lot more use of mobile phones. Those who did not have a phone had one readily shared with them. There was one gentleman I stood next to who had one phone, as he was speaking to friends, colleagues and loved ones, and another phone—showing the technological genius of Japan—beaming through, via wi-fi and the 3G network, what was actually happening on the ground, including the devastating earthquake.

Even reaching Tokyo, where the electric train system had ceased working, some estimate up to eight million Japanese people were stuck in Tokyo. Many millions then walked home. Estimates are that many millions stayed in Tokyo itself, finding somewhere they could possibly sleep—in the workplace or indeed in train stations or other covered areas. And at zero degrees and plunging on the streets of Tokyo, with millions of people, there was no sense of pushing, no sense of shoving, but people waiting orderly and calmly in line for food. While there was certainly traffic gridlock, as cars sought to leave Tokyo, the great flood of humanity on the streets was orderly, it was polite and it was calm. It speaks volumes of the Japanese people and how they have stoically got on with the job.

As the disaster unfolded—and, indeed, it was not until about 1 am in the ambassador's personal residence, where he took us in, as there was nowhere else for our parliamentary team to sleep—we saw the full horror of what was unfolding on Japanese TV. It would subsequently take seven hours, through numerous trains, buses and taxis to make it to the airport as the full enormity of the situation unfolded. But even then, there were images of women and children and elderly people, standing in queues in the snow in the northern part of Japan, encouraging others to go first. There were reports of food arriving for people, which they would hand down the queues to the more vulnerable, the elderly and the young, to have it first. What we have seen is the very best of Japan.

Of course, we look with some trepidation at what is happening with the Tokyo Electric Company, the Fukushima nuclear plant. But, again, as it is slowly coming under control, we see 150 people—the Fukushima 150 they call them—with teams of 50 men at a time going into the damaged reactor areas, under terrible conditions,

to seek to bring the reactor cooling under control. It is reported that there are no young men amongst them; only the older men who had children could volunteer. It speaks volumes of the courage and sacrifice. Japanese TV was reporting that these 150 men at Fukushima are the modern day samurai, willing to lay down their lives for the Japanese people to bring the reactors under control.

In a fascinating statement, a statement of great leadership, the Japanese Prime Minister came on national television to exhort the Japanese people that the Fukushima men had to bring the plant under control—and, to quote him on national television, ‘retreat was unthinkable.’ The fate of that nation rests in those 150 men, and I believe they have acquitted themselves magnificently, and only time will tell what they have brought about through their courage and sacrifice.

I commend Ambassador McLean and his full embassy staff for the sacrifice they made for their long hours, for their tireless work. I thank the ambassador personally for giving us his personal home to have a couple of hours sleep in and for keeping us informed. I thank his staff, especially the trade commissioner, who came with us on our seven-hour epic journey to the airport, where we arrived before the evidence advance team, who came by road and found that blocked and joined us on the convoluted and difficult train journey to get to the airport.

I thank Qantas, who delayed their plane by up to two hours to ensure the maximum number of Australians could be on the flight. I caught up with the 747-400 pilot of that QF personally, to thank him after the flight. As he talked about the due time to take off there were still a hundred Australians missing—as in, had not made the flight—and he would wait until the last 24, who happened to be children, boarded the flight. Of course, everyone’s connections were stuffed up with a flight leaving so late. Qantas would take responsibility for that, but it speaks volumes of the national carrier that it would actually delay flights at its cost to ensure that all Australians could leave Japan on that first flight out, followed closely by a second flight through to WA.

I have nothing but praise for the Japanese people, for the leaders, for those men who are fighting in Fukushima to get the reactors under control. I have nothing but praise for embassy staff and our Qantas staff. I certainly commend the defence minister. We have three C17 Globemasters in theatre at present; two more taking water cannons to the Japanese people. I offer my heartfelt condolences to the Japanese nation. They are going through a trial—20,000 killed, a great part of their countryside devastated, the economy hit hard. This is a difficult blow to an economy already struggling. The Japanese people need to know that we as a nation will stand with them. I think that is readily demonstrated by the fact that there are only two foreign militaries right now operating alongside the Japanese Self Defence Force: the US military and the Australian military. That speaks volumes, louder than words ever could, of how special the relationship is with Japan and our commitment to it as a nation as it seeks to rebuild.

Question agreed to, honourable members standing in their places.