

## Your Story - from the Arts to the art of diplomacy

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**From “fresh-faced” Latin graduate to senior career diplomat – it’s unlikely Phillip Gibson had any inkling of the many interesting twists and turns his career would take when he graduated from Otago in the early 1970s.**

The “proud” Otago alumnus spoke with Alumni and Friends earlier this year, soon after he received the highest honour given to non-heads of state by the Japanese government.

Phillip, who was ambassador to Japan between 1999 and 2004, received the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star for “furthering friendship and understanding between Japan and New Zealand.”

He says it was “somewhat humbling” to learn more about the 143-year-old award; previous recipients included US Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross, former US Assistant Secretary of Defence and international strategist Joseph Nye, prominent economist Jagdish Bhagwati and well-known Singaporean international lawyer (and ambassador) Tommy Koh.

He was also quick to acknowledge the efforts of others in building relations between Japan and New Zealand.

“The award represents the cumulative work of many people over many years, in both Japan and New Zealand, towards building close relations and mutual understanding. And I’ve been honoured and privileged to be a part of this,” he says.



*(Left) The presentation of credentials to the Emperor of Japan at the award investiture ceremony and (right) Phillip with family wearing the decoration.*

The Embassy of Japan said the award recognised his contribution to the region as Ambassador, CEO of the Asia 2000 Foundation (now the Asia New Zealand Foundation) and Commissioner General for the Aichi World Expo (2005), and the "invaluable assistance" he provided to Japanese citizens and their families, who were affected by the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes.

While Phillip's preceding diplomatic career involved many senior postings to exotic locations – he describes working in Manila during the demise of the Marcos regime as especially "exciting" – since 2011 he has been the Christchurch-based Special Envoy for Disaster Risk Management, Special Adviser and Director Christchurch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Immediately after the devastating quakes Phillip led the Ministry of Foreign Affairs response on the ground; more than 40 per cent of people who lost their lives were foreign nationals, and international search and rescue expertise was needed.

While well-established protocols meant UN accredited search and rescue teams could arrive in New Zealand and set up self-contained operations, many processes, such as bringing sniffer dogs into the country at short notice, were "more complex."

The "behind-the-scenes" diplomatic response was also far-reaching.

"We had embassy staff around the globe scouring for everything from portable toilets to explosives experts who could safely bring down damaged buildings."

More recently, he has focused on recovery and rebuild initiatives.

These various experiences reinforced his belief in the "massive international dimension" to disaster response initiatives, and showed how while states may disagree on political or economic issues, they could speak a "common language" in relation to effective disaster risk management.

*"Disasters know no boundaries. We might help our friends by responding in the South Pacific, Southeast Asia and further afield, but Christchurch really brought home to us that even though we're pretty good at this, we needed outside help. As the frequency and intensity of climate-change related disasters increases this will become more apparent; some areas in the Pacific are already living with the impact now."*

New Zealand's expertise in disaster risk management can provide genuine assistance in times of trouble and give substance to our international friendships, he says.

Phillip graduated from Otago in 1971 with a BA(Hons), majoring in Latin and recommends students integrate language studies in degrees of any kind.

"It doesn't matter if you are a scientist, want to be a diplomat, or grow business opportunities – you need an appreciation of people's culture and the ability to communicate with them – language studies brings both of these ..."

Phillip joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1972 and his ability with Latin saw him posted to Rome.

As access to traditional markets was threatened, as happened when Britain joined the European Union in 1973, there was "a process of realignment," he says.

"We had to diversify and find new markets and Asia was an obvious choice. Also, we were fighting a rear-guard action in Britain and Europe to ensure the ongoing access Britain had given us didn't close off. We had a major effort underway to ensure transitional arrangements would continue.

"Luckily, we were able to look to Japan. For many years it was one of our top two or three trading partners. It was also Japan that provided much of the impetus, investment and know-how for wider economic development in East and Southeast Asian countries, which are so important for us today."

Japan is a world and regional power, and fundamentally important to New Zealand. But while the relationship was previously defined in terms of trade opportunities, broader cultural and political ties with the power-house economy have emerged in recent years and links between the two countries now transcend economic ties.

“It is about much more than just trade. The span and depth of people-to-people links and activities are extraordinary. Perhaps even without realising it New Zealanders increasingly source from Japan ideas, technology, and cultural, artistic, sporting and intellectual inspiration – there’s a cultural resonance and Kiwis and Japanese are similarly a bit self-effacing and modest, while being quietly capable.”

A decade into his career Phillip realised he wanted to become a specialist in East and Southeast Asian affairs because he “sensed that’s where New Zealand’s destiny lay”.

He has since worked in New York and Manila, and was Ambassador to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (1992-96). He was Ambassador to Indonesia (2005-2010) and also New Zealand’s first Ambassador to ASEAN. He was Chief Executive of the Asia New Zealand Foundation in its formative years and as Commissioner General he led the New Zealand participation in the Aichi (Japan) 2005 and Shanghai 2010 World Expos. He was also Chief Executive Asia 2000 Foundation of New Zealand (1996-99).

Phillip attended Otago Boys’ High School from 1963 until 1967, when he was Dux and Best All Round Boy. He was also a member of the First Cricket XI, First Basketball Five, leader of the Debating Team, President of the School Council and a Prefect.

“I look back with a lot of gratitude to Dunedin. I’ve always been very proud of my Dunedin roots, both living and growing up there, Otago Boys’ High School and the University of Otago. And I’ve always taken every opportunity in my career to do something in gratitude for what I feel that up-bringing gave me,” he says.

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