

How a new Government in Japan could impact on the whaling industry

The change of government in Japan in a landslide victory to the Democratic Party of Japan (DJP) provides new hope of a shift on Japan's whaling policies – especially if the Australian government plays the right cards.

Whilst all major parties in Japan officially support the current whaling policy, there are 3 key policies of the DJP that will create an environment unfavourable to the way the whaling industry is currently run.

On the campaign trail, DJP leader Yukio Hatoyama promised that he would cut wasteful government spending, gain back control from the bureaucrats and create a more open, less secretive government.

A more open Government

The DPJ has campaigned on a policy of more open government, less secrecy and greater Government transparency. The whaling industry is covered in secrecy and relies upon entrenched and powerful bureaucrats who staunchly protect their interests in the Fisheries Agency of Japan.

In 2008, Greenpeace exposed evidence of a large [whale meat scandal](#) within the industry that generated topline news and rocked the industry. The Government responded by ransacking Greenpeace offices and arresting two activists, [Toru Suzuki and Junichi Sato](#) (known as the 'Tokyo Two'). Suzuki and Sato are still awaiting trial. Both face up to 10 years in jail for their efforts to expose the secrets within the whaling industry.

Japanese bureaucrats have gone to great lengths to cover up the whale meat embezzlement scandal and punish the Tokyo Two for exposing it. The case is in danger of turning into an international human rights issue, and Australia has an obligation as a signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political rights to ensure Japan lives up to its responsibilities under the agreement.

[Toru Suzuki, one half of the Tokyo Two will be in Australia to meet with politicians and give [public talks](#) in Canberra and Sydney on September 8 and 9.]

Greater fiscal responsibility and less Government spending¹

The DPJ have promised to [crack down on Government waste](#) and inefficient subsidies. The whaling industry is far from profitable and sucks millions of dollars from the public purse, as costs for expensive operations to Antarctic waters increase and the stockpiles of unsold whale meat mount.

The whaling industry costs the Japanese people more than 1.2 billion yen in annual taxpayers money. Trillions more yen are spent as part of the government's foreign aid budget to recruit countries to the International Whaling Commission.

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"Japan has nil national interest in the whaling industry. The stake for Japan is near zero."

Tomohiko Taniguchi

Former Japan Foreign Affairs spokesperson on whales

¹ <http://www.dpj.or.jp/english/manifesto/manifesto.html>

The Institute for Cetacean Research, which devises the so-called research programme has outstanding loans to the government of 3.2 billion yen.²

Importantly, it is this feature of the whaling industry that could bring about its final end in Japan. The Japanese economy has been hit hard by the global financial crisis, and the new Government will be looking for ways to cut Government spending.

Greenpeace is the only organisation running a grassroots campaign against whaling in Japan. We have had the greatest success with providing information to Japanese people about the millions of Yen in government subsidies enjoyed by the whaling industry – and the waste of public funds spent on killing whales for meat that the public does not want to eat.³

Wrestling control off the bureaucrats

Japanese bureaucrats are notorious for wielding power – sometimes more than their political masters. The institutionalised practice of “golden parachutes” (Amakudari - ‘descent from heaven’), where Japanese senior bureaucrats retire to high-profile positions in the private and public sectors, is widespread.

Officials from the Fisheries Agency of Japan are often “parachuted” upon retirement into the private company Kyodo Sempaku, which runs and maintains the whaling fleet, and the Institute of Cetacean Research which runs the “scientific” whaling program.

The practice has been targeted by the DJP as corrupt and a drag on unfastening the ties between private sector and state, which prevent economic and political reforms. Their promise to abolish golden parachutes is a popular policy in the electorate.

International reputation

On foreign policy, the new Government is likely to be more responsive to the way the whaling issue, more than any other, has tarnished Japan’s international reputation.

They will be open to advice from experts, like the former long-term spokesman for Japanese Foreign Affairs, Tomohiko Taniguchi who has stated publicly that whaling costs more than it earns for the country. He said, “Japan has nil national interest in the whaling industry... this issue is doing substantial damage to Japan's image in Australia, the US, Canada, the UK, New Zealand,” the entire English-speaking world.⁴

What the Australian Government can do

In November the Japanese whaling fleet is due to depart on its annual whale hunt in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary. There is a unique window of opportunity for the Australian government to encourage the new Japanese government to bring its policies to bear on the unjustified support for the whaling industry.

For the Australian Government to take a newly elected Government to an international court over the whaling issue, as it has long threatened, would be seen as a provocative move. The Tokyo Two trial is the only court case currently running that the Government could support if it wants to end whaling in the Southern Ocean.

Yet in keeping with the Rudd Government's preference for diplomacy, there is a key opportunity now to exert maximum pressure on the new Japanese government before the departure of the whaling fleet.

A visit to Japan by Australia's top diplomat, Mr Rudd himself, would encourage the new Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama to pull the government rug from under the whaling industry. Such a visit before November has more chance of tipping the balance toward an end to whaling than at any time in recent memory.

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² Asahi Shimbun, February 2, 2008: Research whaling faces another challenge of financing, unable to pay back national funds of 1 billion yen.

³ Greenpeace polling in Japan in 2008 revealed that 95% of Japanese people have either never or rarely eaten whale meat. There are currently around 5,000 tonnes of frozen whale meat in storage from the Japanese whaling program waiting to be sold.

⁴ Reported by Peter Hartcher, SMH, 21/11/08. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/peter-hartcher/japans-fading-appetite-for-a-fight/2008/11/20/1226770639938.html?page=2>