

# Broad roles for Customs overseas representatives

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*When Australian Customs two representatives in Japan took up their posts a few years ago neither could have imagined the broad range of the work they would undertake nor the geographical spread of places they would visit as Australian Customs representatives in the Asian region.*

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**G**erard McLinden's role as Senior Australian Customs Representative has taken him as far afield as the sub-continent, Europe, North America and Africa as well as most of the countries in the Asian region. David Turner, Australian Customs Representative, has worked in places like Mongolia and Myanmar which are well and truly off the regular tourist map.

While Gerard and David acknowledge overseas travel is an essential element of their work, they

**Gerard McLinden (seated) and David Turner, with Japanese staff members Mariko Hirano (left) and Noriko Yasutomi, at the Australian Embassy, Tokyo.**

point out that it is only a small part of the important work they do for Australian Customs in Japan. And some of the travel they undertake is not always as enjoyable as it might seem.

For example, David's job recently took him to Myanmar where he had to fly into an opium poppy field on an old Russian built helicopter accompanied by heavily armed Burmese militia. Gerard tells the story of how he had to hitch a ride from Zimbabwe to Zambia in an old car with a group of mining engineers after his plane was cancelled and he had to get from Harare to Lusaka to conduct a workshop for the World Customs Organization. Gerard's Zambian visit was further complicated by the fact that his co-presenter did not turn up for the first three days and his luggage was sent on to Malawi by mistake. He did not get it back till he was leaving for the airport to return to Tokyo.

Gerard and David readily acknowledge they probably have the two best jobs in Customs and that the advantages associated with overseas service far outweigh any disadvantages, but say a sense of humour and an ability to improvise are essential characteristics of a good representative. Both also acknowledge the important roles played by their respective spouses and families.

While they are busy in their office in the Australian Embassy in Tokyo, or on frequent trips within the region, it is their families that have had to make the biggest adjustment from



life in Canberra's suburbs to life in downtown Tokyo. For example, while Japan is geographically 20 times smaller it has a population many times larger than that of Australia. Tokyo and Yokohama between them have a population almost as large as the whole of Australia. According to David it often seems they are all out on the street at the same time. Between them, Gerard and David have six children at school in Tokyo and all seem to have made the transition very well. They are learning Japanese and read enough to become very useful to their parents on trips to the supermarket.

Both officers also drive in Tokyo and say the biggest problem they have is finding their way around without getting lost. Many Tokyo streets are not named or signposted and the numbering system employed is still a mystery even after two years says David. Gerard commented that it is not so different from driving in Sydney except Japanese drivers are more polite and tolerant of overseas visitors making the occasional mistake.

The Australian Customs Service has maintained an office in Tokyo since the early 1960s. Initially, the office was located within the Australian Trade Office but since 1989 has been located in the Australian Embassy. Within the Embassy our officers carry the diplomatic designations of Counsellor and First Secretary.

In addition to our two Australian officers the Tokyo post has two locally engaged Japanese staff, Noriko Yasutomi and Mariko Hirano. Noriko has been with the Customs office for nearly 30 years and is very well known to the many Customs staff who have visited or worked in the Tokyo office over the years. Mariko joined the office in mid-1999 but is already answering some of the hundreds of inquiries the office receives every year from Japanese travellers preparing to visit Australia.

The primary role of the Customs Office is to assist in the achievement of Australian Customs international objectives and promote its interests in the Asian region. Over the years the nature of the work undertaken by the office has changed significantly. These days it has five key objectives. These are:

- contributing to maintenance and development of cooperative relationships with regional organisations and customs administrations;
- providing high quality representation at international meetings, seminars, and conferences;
- undertaking assignments for Customs and other key agencies;
- facilitating the exchange and sharing of experience, information and intelligence as well as reporting on regional developments in areas of interest to the Customs; and
- contributing to development and implementation of Customs international strategy.

Gerard also represents the Australian Federal Police in Japan and David Turner works part-time in the World Customs Organization's Regional Intelligence Liaison Office which is based in Japan. David describes his position there as one of his career highlights and believes that the office is making a real contribution to enhancing regional cooperation in enforcement related matters.

Asia is of immense importance to Australia and Australian Customs has wide range of interests in the region which need to be well managed to ensure our international objectives are met. While prime responsibility for our international efforts falls to Customs International Section in Canberra, the importance of local representation cannot be overstated. This point was emphasised by Tim Chapman, Director International, who stressed the importance of

sound personal and professional contacts, particularly in the Asian region.

The choice of Japan as the base of our Asian office is sometimes questioned by staff. Gerard believes it is a sensible choice for many reasons, including the long tradition of close cooperation between Australian and Japanese customs, now working together on a wide range of bilateral and multilateral forums in areas as diverse as electronic commerce, risk management, commercial fraud, integrity, trade facilitation, drug enforcement, people smuggling and intellectual property rights.

In addition, Gerard stressed that despite some serious economic difficulties in recent years Japan remains the world's second largest economy and is Australia's largest export market. It takes 19 per cent of total Australia exports and outstrips our second and third largest trading partners combined. Japan is also an active member of the WTO, APEC, and the WCO.

The Australian Customs Service works closely with Japanese Customs on a wide range of issues including The APEC Sub Committee on Customs Procedures and the WCO Asia-Pacific regional group for which Australia is currently regional representative and Japan is regional training coordinator. Close cooperation between the two administrations has led to important initiatives being accepted internationally and better coordination of technical assistance activities.

Likewise, the Tokyo post is responsible for maintaining our close relationship with other important regional customs administrations including China, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Taiwan. In fact the Senior Representative is accredited to the diplomatic corps in China and Korea as well as Japan.

Both officers commented that the Australian Customs Service is extremely well respected in the Asian region and is regarded as a regional leader in many areas of customs administration and public sector reform. Gerard said that wherever he travels Customs officials at all levels know about what Australian Customs is doing and are keen to learn from our experience. In particular, the wide-ranging changes envisaged under our Cargo

Management Re-engineering project are generating a lot of interest in Japan and among other customs administrations in the region.

Gerard will complete his term in Tokyo at the end of this year and is moving with his family to Brussels to take up a 5-year appointment with the WCO. Chris Wall, currently Director, Planning and Performance Analysis in Central Office will replace Gerard in Tokyo. Chris will move to

Tokyo in late November to commence language training before taking up duty in March 2000.

In early 2000 the Australian Customs Service will establish a second Asian post based in Bangkok, Thailand. The post will have a drug enforcement focus and Bob Martin, a Western Australian currently working in Canberra, has been selected to head up the post.

## Customs and University of Canberra extend partnership

**T**he Australian Customs Service and the University of Canberra have agreed to extend their innovative public sector education partnership for a further two years.

The extension of the agreement was signed in Canberra on 30 June 1999. It means that the university will continue to deliver a fully accredited Commercial Education Program (CEP) for Customs staff. (See A New Era in Customs Staff Education, Manifest Vol.1 No.2.)

The program, jointly developed and delivered by Customs and the University of Canberra, is tailored to provide Customs officers with training opportunities ranging from workplace skilling to more traditional academic subjects.

Since its inception in June 1997, the comprehensive and flexible training program has been taken up by more than 530 Customs officers.

The CEP's aim is to provide Customs officers with the expertise required to cope with a wide range of complex business issues. The program is available in face-to-face and distance education forms. It ensures that the technical skills and knowledge needed by officers is imparted in the most effective way and enables officers to work towards externally recognised tertiary qualifications.

The program is structured into four qualifications: certificate level IV, diploma, advanced diploma and ultimately a degree. It consists of a vast range of subject specific, discrete units of training.

Subjects covered include aspects of accounting, management, legal principles, compliance audit techniques, systems analysis, business statistics, import and export processing, and many more.

Customs Chief Executive Officer, Lionel Woodward and the university's Vice Chancellor, Professor Don Aitkin signed the extended agreement.

Mr Woodward said the CEP was designed to encourage participants to be adaptable and meet the challenges of an ever-changing world.

"This continuing collaboration with the University of Canberra ensures that the attributes, skills and knowledge needed by Customs officers are imparted in the most effective way," he said.

Professor Aitkin said: "The university has worked with Customs now for several years and we have learned a great deal about how to design and deliver a tailored educational program to a diverse and intelligence workforce across the nation. The partnership with Customs is one of the university's very best relationships and we mean to keep it that way."