

**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR SONAM TOBGAY ON 17 DECEMBER 2021
AT THE NATIONAL DAY RECEPTION & OPENING OF THE EMBASSY IN
HOTEL HYATT**

- **Mr. David Smith, the Federal Member for Bean;**
- **Ambassador Harinder Sidhu, Deputy Secretary at DFAT & other senior officials of DFAT;**
- **H.E. Mr. Ali M. Kraishan, Ambassador of Jordan & Dean of the Diplomatic Corp;**
- **Heads of Missions;**
- **Mr. Tshering Penjore, President, Australia Bhutanese Association of Canberra;**
- **Friends of Bhutan in Australia;**
- **Other distinguished guests; and My fellow Bhutanese.**

Today is an auspicious and a historic day for Bhutan! Auspicious, as we celebrate the 114th National Day. And a historic occasion, as we mark the opening of Bhutan's Embassy in Canberra, becoming the latest addition to Australia's expanding diplomatic community. Therefore, my colleagues and I are deeply honored by your presence, especially Mr. David Smith, Federal Member for Bean, who graciously consented to be our Chief Guest.

On this joyous occasion, I have the honor to convey to the friendly people of Australia the warmest greetings of His Majesty The King and Her Majesty The Queen of Bhutan, and the best wishes of the Bhutanese people.

The friendship between Bhutan and Australia was forged in 1962, when the first Bhutanese to reach the shores of Australia were three charming ladies. These ladies were Bhutan's observer delegation to the Colombo Plan Meeting, led by Ashi Tashi Dorji, the beautiful sister of the then Queen of Bhutan. Bhutan, at this time, had just started taking steps to modernize and engage with the world outside.

Australia broke with protocol as the Chair of the Colombo Plan and waived a year off the mandatory 2-year period as observer for Bhutan. And, thus, Bhutan gained membership to its first international organization. And that - was the start of a beautiful friendship!

It was, therefore, fitting that many years later in 2018, Ambassador Harinder Sidhu, on behalf of the Governor General, conferred on Ashi Tashi Dorji, the title of 'Honorary Officer of the Order of Australia', for her distinguished service to Australia-Bhutan relations.

In 1971, Australia was again among the first countries to welcome Bhutan to the United Nations.

People often look at international relations with cynical eyes, but there are exemptions. Let's pause a moment here and look at the facts to appreciate the magnanimity and the genuine friend that Australia has been to Bhutan. Our two countries could not be a more interesting study of contrasts. Australia is a prosperous island continent in the Pacific Ocean, whereas Bhutan, is a tiny landlocked Kingdom, deep in the folds of the Himalayas with little influence, economic or military power. But, our unlikely friendship has persevered through the times.

I also made my journey to the shores of Australia 18 years ago and gained immensely from the exceptional education at the ANU. Like me, thousands of Bhutanese continue to prefer Australia to further their dreams of obtaining a world class education, and opportunities to provide a better life for themselves, their

families and their country. All these are made possible with the open and large-hearted brand of Aussie friendship, which the Government and people of Australia have been extending to Bhutan for the last six decades.

Australia now has the largest number of Bhutanese citizens living abroad. And as responsible and valuable members of the multicultural society of Australia, the young and enterprising Bhutanese are making meaningful contributions to this nation. They are also an invaluable asset for Bhutan, and it is in their success that we take great pride. They are now the living embodiment of Australia-Bhutan friendship and the crucial link for people-to-people relations between our two countries.

It is for all these reasons and the opportunity to expand our bilateral relations that despite the financial challenges posed by the COVID pandemic, our Government took a conscious decision to establish our Embassy in Canberra, making it our 10th diplomatic mission abroad.

The late Hon. Tim Fischer, who was Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the National Party, would have been the happiest Australian to see the opening of the Bhutanese Embassy. It was as if Tim picked up from where Ashi Tashi Dorji left off. Tim's friendship and deep love for Bhutan started four decades ago. To the Bhutanese, Tim represented a positive image of the Aussie - friendly, open, honest and active. He was on first name terms with Bhutanese from all walks of life. He was what the Bhutanese genuinely respect and appreciate as a "good man with good values". While we miss him today, it is only befitting that we pay tribute to him for his invaluable contributions to our bilateral relations.

Another charming Australian, who has contributed significantly to Australia's relations with Bhutan is Mrs. Catherine Harris of Harris Farm Markets. Catherine rendered unconditional support to Bhutan when she was our Honorary Consul for 15 long years from 2004 to 2019. We're proud that she is a recipient of the 'Officer of the Order of Australia' for her great service to her nation. And exactly two years ago today, at our National Day celebrations in Bhutan, our King also conferred to Catherine the 'National Order of Merit Gold' in recognition of her services to Bhutan.

I would also like to thank the former Ambassadors of Australia to Bhutan, Their Excellencies Ambassador Penelope Wensley, who was Australia's first non-resident Ambassador to Bhutan, and who we're honored to have here today; Ambassador John McCarthy; Ambassador Peter Varghese, who is now Chancellor of Queensland University; Ambassador Patrick Suckling; and Ambassador Harinder Sidhu, currently Deputy Secretary at DFAT and who was a delight to work with while we were both posted in Delhi. All of them have worked tirelessly to strengthen our bilateral relations.

Let me also pay tribute to the thousands of Australians, some of whom are present today, who have helped Bhutan and the Bhutanese in immeasurable ways.

Let me also take the opportunity today to thank the diplomatic community and Chief of Protocol, Ian, and his efficient team at DFAT for the warmth of your welcome and the support extended to us since our arrival.

As we celebrate this historic milestone today, my team and I take inspiration from the three pioneering charming Bhutanese ladies, who took the long journey from

Bhutan to Australia in 1962. We will continue with the mission they embarked on, six decades ago, and build on their great and lasting legacy, by further strengthening this unique and beautiful friendship between our two peoples, and our two nations.

Thank You and Tashi Delek!