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Republic's healthy trade with Japan is no accident

By Niall McKay

WIRED ON FRIDAY: It's taken many years of hard work by various State agencies but the results are clear, as more Irish companies set up in Japan and vice versa

A Japanese woman in a kimono was doing a jig with a chap in a kilt. The dance floor was packed, and on stage Dé Dánnan was belting out the jigs and the reels. In the corner, Paddy Foley's Irish Bar had set up some kegs and the pints of Guinness were flying.

Both the Irish and the Japanese were lapping it up at the 10th annual Ireland Fund Emerald Ball in Tokyo's plush Westin Hotel last Friday.

Of course, the real reason for the event was to raise money for the Ireland Fund, and it was an enormous success, raising more than €4 million from sponsors such as Virgin Atlantic, Air Canada, Guinness, Waterford Crystal and others.

The ball is also the premier paddy-bash in Japan. However, such events end up being so much more than that. Indeed they are part of the Republic's public face abroad, which certainly in Japan and the United States has been a vital part of our economic and technological success at home.

If jigs and reels in Tokyo seem strange, then imagine how strange it is to find Japanese dignitaries loving the crack and the Guinness every bit as much as their hosts. In fact, it's a good representation of the ease in which two totally

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dissimilar cultures can mix given the right opportunity.

But it's no accident. It's the result of many years of hard work on behalf of the Republic's representatives in Japan - the Irish Embassy, the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, which, like their colleagues in the US and elsewhere, have been busy building trade relations here.

And Japan has been a harder sell than most. There is no natural connection between the two countries, no immigrant history, few cultural similarities (except we both like to take a drink) and little or no business connections.

But in the past 30 years the IDA has managed to change that and has attracted more than 30 Japanese high-tech and chemical companies to our shores including, Olympus, Mitsubishi Chemicals, Yamanouchi, Takeda Chemicals, NEC, Fujitsu, Hitachi Koki and TDK.

More recently, Enterprise Ireland has been helping indigenous companies set up shop in Tokyo and there are currently 20 companies including Parthus, Network365, Xiam and Kerry Ingredients.

However, even 20 years ago such an operation would have been practically unthinkable, because finding qualified company men and women in the Republic who spoke Japanese was kind of tricky.

So the Irish Embassy got together with FÁS and started a programme to bring Irish graduates to Japan. The deal was that they would get placed with a Japanese company, work their little hearts out and, in return, learn to speak Japanese.

This programme has provided the pool of Irish people in both Japan and the Republic who have been hired by Irish companies setting up in Japan and by Japanese companies setting up in the Republic.

Another programme places third-year Irish university students who are studying Japanese in a university in Japan for a year. That too has been successful and a fair number of the younger Irish crew here have been on one of the programmes.

In many ways, this is how trade relations are fostered. They start with meetings in nondescript conference rooms, a quiet pint somewhere or, indeed, a jig or a reel, and end with factories being built in the Republic or Irish companies selling their goods in foreign markets.

Back at the party, Mr Padraig Murphy, the recently arrived Irish Ambassador to Tokyo, was the first on the dancefloor and actually he's quite a dancer. He was

entertaining Mrs Yoko, the former Japanese ambassador to the Republic and the first woman to be appointed to Japan's Supreme Court, at his table.

The IDA's Brian Coogan was entertaining Mr Hashimoto, the former head of Mitsubishi Chemical's operation in Limerick, and Mr Shimoyama, the former president of Olympus, and now a senior adviser to the company.

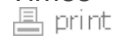
Mr Declan Collins, Enterprise Ireland's man in Tokyo, was entertaining everybody. Flitting between tables laughing and joking with equal ease in both English and Japanese; running up to the podium to make the announcements; and looking after the stragglers and Tokyo's new arrivals like myself.

Indeed, I was glad to finally get to meet Mr Collins as I had been hearing about him for quite some time. As the IDA's first man in Silicon Valley (also my previous residence), he's an old hand at promoting the Republic abroad and, therefore, helping us to become the high-tech nirvana we are today.

Still, it's good to see that we're liked in Japan almost as much as we are in the US. Let's hope our soccer fans help during the World Cup this summer. I am sure they will.

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