

## MESSAGE FROM CONSUL-GENERAL SASAYAMA TAKUYA

February 2021

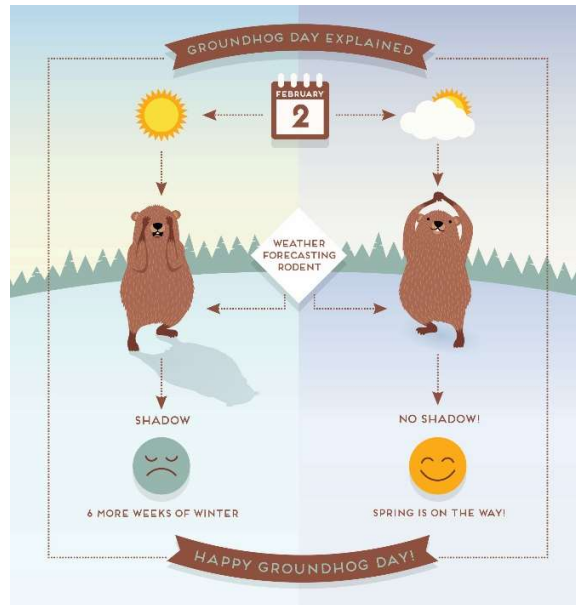
We are now in February, and the monthlong state of emergency that had been declared by the Government of Ontario was lifted on Feb. 9. Various restrictions have started to ease with the exception of Toronto, Peel and York regions, as well as the North Bay Parry Sound District. However, a new development has emerged with respect to the pandemic in the form of virus variants. Although relaxed restrictions are welcome, safety measures in preventing infections must continue. I ask everyone to maintain protocols against the spread of COVID-19 in accordance with the information provided by your local authorities.

Meanwhile, daylight hours have been growing noticeably longer this month.

During this time between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, the Japanese enjoy traditions such as *Setsubun* (the division of seasons celebrated with such rituals as scattering soybeans) and *ehomaki* (a long sushi roll eaten on *Setsubun*) that anticipate springtime. In Ontario, the long and harsh winters make it easy to understand why people here yearn so much for spring. This is especially true this year under the pandemic. There is a quaint tradition in Canada to predict how long winter will continue and when spring will arrive by waking a hibernating groundhog to emerge from its burrow and tell us. In this month's message, I would like to tell you about Groundhog Day which comes around on Feb. 2 every year.



On the morning of that day, when the groundhog emerges from hibernation, if the sun is shining and it goes back into its burrow from being surprised by its own shadow, it is said there will be six more weeks of winter. On the other hand, if it is cloudy and it doesn't see its shadow, spring is supposed to come early. There are various theories as to the origin of this practice, but it seems to have been brought to North America by people who came here from Europe.



This event is apparently held in various parts of Ontario and Canada, but what caught my attention most was the story of a groundhog named Willie in Warton, a community about 220 km northwest of Toronto. There, the tradition originated in 1956 when a local resident invited a newspaper reporter from Toronto to promote the town using the groundhog. The reporter actually came to Warton, but in reality there was no Willie the groundhog at the time. The reporter could not go back to the city without a story, so they devised a plan by which they dug a hole and threw in a woman's white hat in lieu of a groundhog.

The people of Ontario use such practices to endure long winters as they wait for spring, and I feel I have come to better understand the importance of tradition. This year, Groundhog Day was observed online at various locations. Even in Warton, where crowds of visitors normally gather for the occasion, the arrival of spring was predicted online using the same method as the story from 65 years ago: by tossing a white hat.

This time of year also marks the Lunar New Year. The other day, I went to a neighbourhood bakery where they were selling a special cake celebrating the Year of the Ox. I thought this was a very appropriate sight for multicultural Toronto so took a photo.



My writing about the groundhog this month notwithstanding, I actually have never seen a real one. Currently, my “Animal Ontario Fridays” series of photos is being posted every Friday afternoon on our Facebook page and on Twitter. Should an opportunity present itself, I would love to take a picture of the noble groundhog who has woken from hibernation.



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Consul-General of Japan