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Politicians and Bureaucrats: What's Wrong and What's to Be Done

Gerald L. Curtis

The six chapters that comprise this volume were written by members of the Diet from the Liberal Democratic, Democratic, and New Komeito parties. They are members of a new generation of politicians in Japan who have a deep interest in issues that affect not just their constituents but the nation as a whole, and who are concerned about designing a new architecture for policymaking.

The six of them participated in a Japan Center for International Exchange study group that I had the pleasure to chair. The study group started out discussing relations between bureaucrats and politicians and how those relations should be restructured. It quickly became evident that the issue of how to restructure the policymaking process involves other questions as well. These include the relationships between the prime minister and the governing party organizations, the role of Diet committees, and the issue of staff support for politicians, parties, the Diet, and the prime minister.

Each of the six chapters that these politicians wrote explores these and other matters of policymaking in the context of a specific policy issue. Each provides important insights into the substantive issue at hand and the policy process relating to it. In this opening chapter, I focus on giving an overview of the issues that currently are of so much concern in Japan related to government policymaking. The chapter discusses why the issue of politician versus bureaucrat draws so much attention in Japan today, what has changed about this relationship in recent years, why further reform of the policymaking process is needed, and what in my view the major objectives of reform should be.

BUREAUCRAT-POLITICIAN COMPETITION

The struggle between politicians and bureaucrats for control over public policy decision making is an important feature of politics in all economically developed countries that have democratic

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political systems. The father of modern political sociology, the German scholar Max Weber, nearly 100 years ago identified the struggle between bureaucrats who commanded technical expertise and popularly elected politicians who were accountable to the public for the government's policies as potentially one of the most serious challenges to the effective functioning of the democratic political party systems that were then developing in Germany and elsewhere in Europe (see Aberbach et al. 1981).

Many observers of the rising mass democracies in the early twentieth century were generally pessimistic about the ultimate outcome of this struggle, believing that as economies became more complex and the need for expertise in making public policy became more pronounced, the bureaucrats' control of information and technical knowledge would give them the upper hand over politicians who were mostly generalists and whose time in office was uncertain. Even the parties themselves, another German sociologist Robert Michels (1956) argued, would become bureaucratized and fall victim to the "iron law of oligarchy."

Weber wrote that skillful bureaucrats do not try to compete openly with politicians for power. They pay lip service to the principle of politician control over the decision-making system and exercise their power by explaining that for technical reasons something the politicians want to do is not feasible or that something the politicians do not want to do is absolutely necessary. And they can sabotage a lot of government policy simply by stalling the implementation of policies of which they do not approve. These insights made so long ago will ring true to anyone familiar with the current Japanese situation.

Beginning this discussion of politician versus bureaucrat in Japan's policy process with a reference to Weber helps to make the point that the Japanese problem is not as unique as many Japanese and many foreign observers of Japan assume it to be. In the United States, there have been many articles and books written about the power of Congressional staffers over the Congressmen they ostensibly serve and about how bureaucrats in line ministries form alliances with the clients of those ministries in the private sector to influence the policy process. The term "iron triangle," which many Japanese use to refer to what they believe is a uniquely incestuous relationship between bureaucrats, industry, and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians, is a term that originated in the United States to describe the relationship between bureaucrats,

industry lobbyists, and members of relevant Congressional committees.

In the United Kingdom, there was a popular television series in the 1980s called "Yes, Minister." The series poked fun at a system in which each morning the new and eager minister calls in his senior bureaucrats and issues his orders for the day. The bureaucrats dutifully say, "Yes, Minister," and leave the room. Later when the minister calls the bureaucrats back in to complain that his orders have not been carried out, the bureaucrats once again obediently say, "Yes, Minister." They leave the room and nothing gets done.* This story has to sound familiar to anyone who is following Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro's so far unsuccessful efforts to dismantle special public corporations (*tokushu hojin*) and implement an array of economic reform policies.

In the mid-1970s, I was living in London and working at the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House). While I was there, I served as moderator of a meeting organized by Chatham House that brought together several British members of parliament (MPs) with a group of Diet members from the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) who were passing through London on their way to attend the British Labour Party convention in Blackpool. The visiting Japanese politicians explained that the LDP's support was steadily and surely declining, that the opposition parties together were close to denying the LDP a majority of seats in the House of Representatives (Lower House), and that the long period of LDP rule would soon come to an end.

After listening to this presentation, the Labour Party MPs at the meeting reminded their Japanese colleagues that when their party first came to power after the Second World War, one of their biggest problems was bureaucratic opposition to anything they tried to do that broke with precedent. If the experience of the United Kingdom and other European countries offered any guide, one MP said with considerable passion, he was sure that when the Socialists came to power they would face a bureaucracy determined to sabotage their policy program.

About a quarter of a century later, I was in a private room at the Hotel New Otani having breakfast with Takemura Masayoshi, the minister of finance in the coalition government of Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, the first Socialist to become prime minister. Takemura, like many successful politicians, is a good storyteller and he had many stories to tell of the difficulties he was having getting the bureaucrats in his ministry to understand that he was in

*This BBC television series was later published in book form. See Lynn (1988).

charge and that they were to carry out his orders rather than the other way around.

The bureaucrats, however, kept on insisting that for one technical reason or another, what Takemura wanted to do was infeasible. They also worked hard to isolate the minister politically. At one point, Takemura in frustration said to them that even if what the bureaucrats argued made sense on technical grounds, the political pressures to do what he was insisting upon were simply too great to be denied. At this point, one of the bureaucrats in the meeting with him said that in fact he had visited with former Minister of Finance and Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru just the day before and that Takeshita had expressed agreement with the position the bureaucrats were advocating. Another chimed in that he had had a similar conversation with the head of the Policy Research Council of the LDP, and yet another recounted a similar conversation with a key Socialist Party leader. The bureaucrats had done their *nemawashi*—their behind-the-scenes consultation—with leaders of the political world to isolate their minister. Takemura insisted that he was determined to teach the bureaucrats who was boss and do what he believed was right. Nonetheless, he concluded, he was sure that the bureaucrats would try to find all kinds of ways to sabotage him. We were speaking in Japanese, but he used the English word "sabotage," and when he did so it triggered my memory of the Labour MP's use of the same word in his warning to the Japanese Socialist politicians so many years earlier.

A few days after this breakfast meeting, I was on a bullet train to Nagoya to participate in a public discussion (*taidan*) with another Takemura, this one being Takemura Ken'ichi, a well-known television personality and commentator on current affairs. We had agreed to meet on the train to sketch out what we would talk about at the meeting. No sooner had we sat down than Takemura said that he had had the oddest experience that very morning. A couple of Ministry of Finance (MOF) officials had come to see him to give him some data and other information that they said might be helpful to him in connection with Minister Takemura's scheduled appearance on his next Sunday morning television show. It was not that unusual, he said, for bureaucrats to do that when their minister was to be interviewed. They would provide information about important issues that the minister was grappling with in the hope that the questioning would take a direction that would enable the minister to publicize the ministry's position and that would reflect well on the minister himself. What was odd about this particular meeting, Takemura said,

was that the bureaucrats came armed with materials to show how misguided their minister was in what he was proposing in the way of policy. He pulled out of his attaché case a sheaf of newspaper clippings, data, and other articles that the bureaucrats had left with him, all of which were critical of Minister Takemura. As Takemura had feared would happen, the bureaucrats' effort to sabotage their minister was in full swing, and it involved trying to influence the media as well as the political leadership.

These stories of bureaucrat-politician competition for control over policymaking underscore the point that the Japanese situation is not unique and that there is no simple answer to how to manage this relationship. It is not possible nor is it necessarily desirable simply to put "politicians in charge," which seems to be what the Japanese term *seiji shudo* suggests should be done. Modern democracies need effective bureaucracies staffed with highly skilled experts. To fatally weaken a strong bureaucracy in the name of administrative reform hardly seems a rational thing to do, but a lot of the reform effort in Japan seems to be aimed at doing just that.

Modern democracies also need political accountability, and to achieve that bureaucrats have to be accountable to political leaders, who are the only ones the public can hold accountable for the government's actions. There is no single or simple formula for striking the right balance between bureaucrat and politician. It necessarily differs with each country because of differences in institutions, traditions, and many other factors as well.

It is important not to underestimate the success modern democratic political systems have had in striking an appropriate balance between bureaucratic and politician power. For one thing, the electoral process has proved to be a powerful constraint on bureaucratic power. Political parties and incumbent candidates wanting to win reelection have forced their policy preferences on the bureaucracy whenever they have believed that doing so was necessary for their own political survival. The Japanese government pushed through tax cuts when MOF opposed them. It refused to introduce a consumption tax for at least ten years after MOF first insisted on its necessity, and it resisted raising the tax rate despite MOF demands that it do so. Bureaucrats may try to convince, oppose, and sabotage political leaders. They often are successful. But in the end they lose out to the political leadership when political leaders believe the stakes are high enough to fight for. The Japanese reality is that for so many years when Japan was committed to the

national goal of rapid economic growth, politicians believed that what the bureaucrats were doing served their interests and therefore saw little reason to oppose them. Over time, this created a pattern of relations that was comfortable for both politician and bureaucrat. Only now is this relationship being challenged in a significant way.

It is important to correctly identify what precisely the problem is in the relationship between bureaucrat and politician in Japan. A wrong diagnosis is almost certain to produce the wrong prescription for a cure. The conventional wisdom in Japan is that policymaking in the Japanese government is a system of bureaucratic dominance in which politicians have little say except when it comes to pork-barrel types of activities. If the situation were this clear cut, coming up with a rational reform program would not be so difficult. It would involve reducing the power of the bureaucracy and increasing that of the politicians. The situation in Japan, however, is anything but simple and a more nuanced, comprehensive, and bold approach to reform is needed.

The relationship between bureaucrat and politician during the long period of LDP one-party dominance cannot be explained in terms of a zero-sum game in which the bureaucrats had all the power and the politicians had none. Political leaders, not bureaucrats, set the framework for postwar Japanese domestic and foreign policy. When bureaucrats say today—as so many of them do—that they need strong political leadership in order to work effectively, they are not dissembling. The "bureaucracy" is in reality a complex of largely independent, often competing ministries and departments, each with its own policy preferences and goals and none with the ability to establish overarching policy. That is the job of political leaders. It is the failing of political leadership, not the power of the bureaucracy, that is responsible for so many of the problems that Japan currently finds itself facing.

Politicians get deeply involved in micromanaging the policy process. That, after all, is what *zoku giin*—the so-called policy tribes in the LDP that are made up of politicians with specialized knowledge, or at least intense interest, in a particular set of policy issues—do when they use their power to get policy outcomes desired by the private sector interests that support and fund them. A lot of the problems of excessive government spending on wasteful and environmentally damaging public works projects cannot be laid at the door of the bureaucracy; it is politicians who are responsible.

There is an extensive academic literature, mostly in the form of published Ph.D. dissertations by American political scientists who are specialists on Japan, that provides convincing case study evidence of the power of interest groups and politicians on a wide range of public policy decisions. The idea that bureaucrats do everything and politicians do nothing when it comes to policymaking is simply not supported by the empirical data.

At the same time, bureaucrats have enormous power in Japan—arguably more so in Japan than in any other modern democratic country. Even France, the closest comparable case to Japan, pales in comparison when it comes to bureaucratic power. Japanese bureaucrats control a great deal of information while politicians have very limited access to information due to the absence of staff support either in the party organizations or among politicians themselves. Information is power and Japanese politicians are heavily dependent on bureaucrats for information, especially given that think tanks and other alternative sources of information and expertise are so weakly developed.

Japanese bureaucrats are protected by stringent civil service laws and by deeply ingrained traditions against political interference in personnel matters. At least until recently, bureaucrats were regarded by the public as being drawn from the best and the brightest the society produced. Bureaucrats were thought to have a sense of mission and a willingness to sacrifice personal material satisfaction to serve the nation, and thus to be incorruptible. For their part, bureaucrats in Japan had a sense of self-confidence and self-importance that goes back to the Meiji period. They came out of a tradition in which those serving in the higher civil service assumed that they, rather than the politicians (much less the masses), were competent to determine public policy. The expression popular in prewar Japan and still well known today, *kanson minpi*—bureaucrats exalted, people despised—captures the essence of this attitude.

Part of the conventional wisdom that Japan has a system of bureaucratic dominance is rooted in the assumption that bureaucrats have expertise and politicians do not. In reality, however, there were many policy experts in the LDP in the past. In its heyday, the LDP drew on two sources for most of its Diet members: policy-wise former high-ranking bureaucrats and street-smart local politicians. The combination was a winning one. The policy experts maintained close ties with bureaucrats in the ministries they themselves came from, and the professional

politicians, the *tojinha*—a term which tellingly has all but disappeared from the Japanese political vocabulary—kept the party's finger on the pulse of the electorate and gave it its populist appeal. In this system the bureaucracy functioned as a powerful and respected think tank for the ruling party.

Today this combination has disappeared. Former bureaucrats entering politics now usually do so after only a relatively brief career in the bureaucracy. They do not have the extensive experience and contacts that earlier generations of bureaucrats-turned-politicians commanded. The professional machine politicians also are far fewer in number, especially now that so many Diet members are second-generation politicians with no experience in elective politics before running for the seat vacated by their father or other close relative.

Moreover, whereas policy experts in the LDP in the past saw their task as working hand in glove with the bureaucrats (who in many cases were the former subordinates of the men now running the LDP) to effect a broadly shared vision of national goals and a common understanding of policy priorities, today there is no such vision and no broad-based consensus on what those priorities should be. The system was so successful for so long that over time many LDP politicians came to take it for granted that the bureaucracy would be able to design the kinds of policies that would make Japan prosperous and keep the LDP in power. Now Japan is in economic trouble and the LDP can only stay in power by coalition with other parties. It is not surprising that the politicians want to blame the bureaucrats.

CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES

The issue of bureaucrat versus politician is important in Japan today not because bureaucrats have had all the power but because fundamental social change, shifting popular values, basic structural changes in the political system, and new social needs have undermined a policymaking system that functioned well for many years in the past. Many LDP politicians seem bewildered by the fact that positions they have taken for years that were popular with their constituents are now suddenly deeply unpopular. To a truly remarkable degree, many of them seem unaware how much Japanese society has changed, especially in the past decade. This change is true not only for urban areas but for rural Japan as well. The ability of local elites to deliver the vote has

declined markedly. Former Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro made that painful discovery in the 2001 LDP presidential election when the party machinery and its supporting interest groups proved unable to deliver the vote to him and prevent Koizumi's victory.

Public attitudes toward government spending on public works are a good example of how social change has affected the dynamic of politics. Japan's most popular prime minister since the Second World War is the current prime minister, Koizumi. Before him, the most popular was the leader of the anti-LDP coalition that came to power in 1993, Hosokawa Morihiro. Prior to that, however, postwar Japan's most popular prime minister was the godfather of Japan's public works spending programs, Tanaka Kakuei.

Tanaka's plan was to "remodel the Japanese archipelago," in large part by undertaking a huge incomes transfer policy that took taxes paid by people in urban Japan and gave that money to people living in rural Japan primarily through spending on public works. This plan was enormously popular with Japanese, both urban and rural. Many urban dwellers, after all, were themselves migrants from rural Japan, drawn to the city to work in the industries that were fueling Japan's rapid economic growth. When Tanaka called for policies to raise the living standards of people on the Japan Sea side of the country and elsewhere in poor regions, urban people responded positively. They had sentimental ties to their own *furusato*, or rural hometown, and felt affluent enough to support this kind of policy. Public works projects were popular.

Today, attitudes are very different. Most urban dwellers no longer have close ties to rural Japan. Consequently, the idea that money should be taken from people in the cities and spent on public works in the countryside, especially in a difficult economic environment, now enrages the public where a couple of decades ago they applauded it. That is why Koizumi's pledge to reduce public works spending is as much a source of his popularity today as the pledge to increase it was a source of Tanaka's support 30 years ago. Bureaucrats and politicians have vested interests in perpetuating the system that Tanaka perfected, however, and their resistance to change is fierce.

Japanese society today is characterized by pluralistic competing public demands on government resources, by a civil society that seeks greater autonomy from the state, and by an economy that can look forward to low growth at best. In such an environment there is a pressing

need to set new priorities and to make hard choices—tasks that bureaucracies are notably ill-designed to undertake successfully. Interdepartmental, much less interministerial coordination is difficult to achieve in complex bureaucratic organizations, and a bias in favor of following precedent greatly reduces the bureaucracy's ability to respond flexibly to new social needs.

In the absence of a concerted effort to restructure the policymaking system in a way that responds to current needs, Japan will simply drift as if on automatic pilot without direction or purpose. Given the seriousness of the problems Japan confronts in respect not only to the economy and financial system but in terms of social policy and, in the aftermath of September 11, foreign and security policy as well, a failure to fundamentally reform the policymaking system is fraught with dangers.

The issue of politician versus bureaucrat has become especially salient in Japan today because of the public's loss of confidence in the bureaucracy. The 1990s is often referred to as a "lost decade" for Japan, and it certainly was that in many ways. But it was also a watershed decade for Japan, one in which values and attitudes that for a long time characterized Japan changed dramatically. Women's attitudes about marriage and work for example, attitudes of youth about the accomplishments and failures of their parents' generation, or public attitudes about opening the country to foreign imports and investment are remarkably different from what they were before the 1990s. And one of the most dramatic historical changes in recent Japanese history has been the rise of antibureaucrat sentiment and of a kind of antielitism more generally among the Japanese public.

The traditional image of the Japanese bureaucracy as incorruptible, competent, and trustworthy has suffered irreparable damage as a result of policy failures and scandals that have hit one ministry after another since the early 1990s. The Ministry of Health and Welfare was rocked by a nursing home kickback scandal involving its vice minister and by public outrage at that ministry's failure to adequately monitor the import of blood products, leading to the infection with the HIV virus of a large number of the hemophiliac population in Japan. The MOF produced a series of corruption scandals, and its policy failures in the aftermath of the collapse of the bubble economy undercut its image for competence. Gross corruption among officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who created a secret slush fund through kickbacks from companies

hired to provide services for the ministry was greeted with anger by the public and with cheers for Foreign Minister Tanaka Makiko's decision to purge some of the ministry's most senior officials. The most recent scandal involved the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries which, despite knowing for the past 15 years from the experience of the United Kingdom that ground bone meal was potentially a source of mad cow disease, continued to allow the importation of such feed products until the disease showed up in Japan in the fall of 2001. The sense that Agriculture Ministry bureaucrats were more concerned about the economic well-being of the beef producers in the country than they were with the public's welfare only reinforced an already strong view that the bureaucracy could not be trusted to act in the national interest. This change in public attitudes amounts to a fundamental change in Japan's political culture. It is something from which the bureaucracy will never be able fully to recover.

The Japanese bureaucracy has been weakened in other ways as well. In the early postwar years, bureaucrats who retired to enter politics generally did so after reaching very high positions in their ministries. They came into politics with many years of experience, expertise, loyal subordinates left behind, and extensive ties with leaders in the private sector. Today, those bureaucrats who enter politics invariably do so early in their careers, at least in the more important Lower House. They are in effect giving up a bureaucratic career in favor of a political one. They have neither the extensive webs of personal relationships nor the rich experience that former generations of bureaucrat-politicians had. Many of them are very talented, but their role has to be fundamentally different from that played by politicians who in the past came into politics after a long bureaucratic career.

Bureaucratic power is also being challenged in a new way by changing public attitudes about transparency and accountability. These issues did not seem so important to the Japanese public as long as a consensus on economic growth prevailed and government policy successfully pursued the grand national project of catching up with the West. Transparency and accountability are perceived very differently today. Both the Japanese public and global markets want to see reforms in Japan to reduce the discretionary authority of bureaucrats and the pattern of informal collusion between bureaucrats and their industry sector clients in favor of a more transparent, rules-based system of far more limited state power. Prime Minister Koizumi's popularity derives

in part from his promise to dismantle a lot of the state apparatus in the form of privatizing and eliminating special public corporations, reducing public works spending, and bringing about more extensive deregulation. The Japanese bureaucracy cannot recover its former position of eminence, and politicians are trying to find a way to fill the vacuum its decline has produced.

The other factor that makes the issue of politician versus bureaucrat so important in Japan today, and that makes it so different an issue than in the past, is the change that has occurred in the political system itself. One-party dominance ended in 1993. Japan has had coalition governments ever since, and there is every reason to believe that it will continue to have coalition governments for the foreseeable future. For as long as the LDP was the only governmental party, there was stability in the relationship between party and bureaucracy. Since 1993, that relationship has been in considerable flux.

During the Hosokawa administration, the vice minister of the MOF openly aligned himself with Ozawa Ichiro to try to force an increase in the consumption tax to 7 percent under the guise of changing it to a "social welfare" tax. In the process, he brought down a torrent of criticism on MOF for its overt interference in the political process. Hosokawa tried to innovate a new policymaking process since he had to gain the support of seven coalition parties to get anything approved, but his government, and that of his short-lived successor Hata Tsutomu, fell before a new system could be established.

Then, under the three-party coalition government of Prime Minister Murayama, there was a significant increase in the power of party organizations, such as the LDP Policy Research Council, in coordinating policy among the three parties. The requirements of coalition government greatly weakened long-existing patterns of policymaking. The role of *kokutai* politics—the behind-the-scenes collusion between the LDP and the opposition parties to move the legislative agenda forward—sharply declined as party leaders shifted their attention to getting agreement among the parties in power rather than working out private deals with the opposition.

Under Prime Minister Hashimoto, the effort was made to strengthen and to shift power more to the Prime Minister's Office, the *kantei.* One of the important reforms Hashimoto introduced, which first came into effect a couple of years after he left office, was to strengthen the *kantei*, streamline the bureaucracy, and introduce a new system of senior vice-ministers and

parliamentary secretaries, all of which was intended to reduce bureaucratic power and increase the power of the prime minister.

Developments since the early 1990s in the policymaking system, however, have exacerbated competition between the *kantei* and executives of the ruling parties for control over policy decisions. Policymaking always has evolved coordinated action among the prime minister and his cabinet, the ruling party and the bureaucracy. Now, however, a veritable dual power structure has emerged. Since Prime Minister Koizumi has committed himself to implement reforms that many people in his own party oppose, LDP leaders have used the party's decision-making organs to thwart his reform drive. They have tried, for example, to use certain customary practices, such as the tradition of having all cabinet bills approved by the LDP before they are submitted to the Diet, to prevent the prime minister from moving forward with his reform program. Whether Koizumi wins this battle over control of policy decision making for the *kantei* will have a major impact on how successful he will be in carrying out his reform program and on whether a new *kantei*- and cabinet-centered decision-making process will be created.

The old policymaking system no longer functions effectively and a new one has not yet been consolidated. The *kantei* has increased its powers but it has not established its control over policymaking. There is a new policy-mindedness among younger politicians, the so-called *seisaku shinjinrui*, but their involvement in the policy process is limited and ad hoc. The system of senior vice ministers is not likely to have a major positive impact on policymaking. Since these vice ministers have no personal staff of their own, they are entirely reliant on the bureaucrats they ostensibly lead for their information. This system essentially increases the number of politician spokesmen for bureaucratic policy positions and gives the bureaucracy a chance to "educate" a larger number of politicians than in the past on how to think about issues.

Moreover, while Prime Minister Koizumi insisted on appointing cabinet ministers without regard to factional politics, he has left the choice of senior vice ministers and parliamentary secretaries to the party secretary-general. Factional considerations dominate these appointments and they make it difficult for the minister and his vice minister and parliamentary secretary to operate as a coordinated strategy team.

Koizumi has tried to change the cabinet culture, but so far he has had only limited success.

In Japan, the cabinet has traditionally been a body of collective leadership rather than one committed to carrying out the prime minister's program. Many cabinet ministers have seen their job as representing the interests of their ministry, meaning interests as defined by ministry bureaucrats, rather than imposing the demands of the prime minister on the bureaucrats under their charge.

Koizumi's promise to change these traditional assumptions and practices and to strengthen his cabinet ministers' control over their ministries' career bureaucrats seemed to be betrayed by his decision to sack his popular foreign minister, Tanaka Makiko, in February 2002. Tanaka was popular precisely because she was a fearless and forceful critic of the bureaucracy and committed to reforming the foreign office. After the administrative vice minister decided to ban two Japan-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from participating in the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, held in Tokyo in January 2002, apparently in response to pressure from a powerful LDP politician and without consulting the foreign minister, Tanaka ordered the decision reversed. This led to a public argument with Tanaka on one side and the LDP politician, Suzuki Muneo, and the administrative vice minister on the other, about whether or not the vice minister had told Tanaka that Suzuki had demanded that the NGOs be banned.

Koizumi's decision to end the matter by removing both Tanaka and the vice minister, and having Suzuki resign his position as chair of an important Diet committee, was greeted with outrage by the public and produced a freefall in Koizumi's popularity ratings. The incident could hardly have been worse for the prime minister, since it called into question his commitment to reform the political and governmental system, which was precisely the plank in his program that the public found most appealing.

DESIGNING A NEW POLICYMAKING SYSTEM

So what is to be done? Weakening a bureaucracy that has many strengths and increasing the power of politicians does not on the face of it necessarily suggest that better policy will result. The situation could become much worse. Under the current electoral system, most members of the Lower House are elected in small, single-member districts in which personal support rather

than party organizational power is the key to political success. Such a system is tailor-made for politicians who focus on locality-specific, pork-barrel type activities. Simply increasing the power of politicians in this system could produce pressures for public spending that would exacerbate rather than reverse patterns of political behavior that are the source of so much criticism today.

Nonetheless, there is a clear need to innovate a system that gives politicians a greater role in designing policy. Politicians and bureaucrats have different roles to play, but it seems unrealistic and undesirable to say that the politician's role should be limited to setting the overall framework for and goals of policy and that the bureaucrats' role should be to make policy to achieve those goals. Politicians need to be directly involved in making policy, and they need access to the expertise—bureaucratic and otherwise—that makes that possible.

Frustration with the difficulties of designing a new policymaking system has led many politicians and commentators to favor constitutional revision to provide for the direct election of the prime minister. In my view, such a reform is likely to prove disastrous. Party identification is extraordinarily weak in Japan—far weaker than in any other democratic country. A direct election of the prime minister would be an election centered entirely on personality and would have little if any base in party organization and identification. That only increases the possibility that the election would become a contest between candidates who are personally popular for reasons that may not be relevant at all to the task of governing a nation. The dangers that such a system would produce a populist leader, in the very worst sense of that term, would be very great. So, too, is the danger that the directly elected prime minister would not have the support of the majority of the parliament, or that parties would fragment in response to the introduction of this system, as happened in Israel. As long as Japan has a parliamentary system, it is better off doing the only thing that makes sense in parliamentary systems, which is to have the individual who can obtain the support of the majority of the members of the parliament become prime minister and form a cabinet.

There is growing agreement among Japanese political observers and among younger Japanese politicians that the single most important policymaking system reform needed is a strengthening of the *kantei* and the powers of the prime minister. This is the goal as well of those

who argue for the direct election of the prime minister, but in Japan's parliamentary system it makes more sense to achieve it by strengthening the policymaking capabilities of the *kantei* and ending a system in which leaders in the ruling party play a central role in policymaking. In principle, party decision-making organs should function as a kind of shadow cabinet when the party is in opposition, but they should not be important policymaking bodies when the party is in power.

There is a parallel need for radical reform of the Diet and the strengthening of its role in policymaking. This, too, involves shifting power from the ruling party's organization to the institution that the Constitution defines as the supreme organ of state power, the Diet. In the Japanese parliament, unlike the U.S. Congress, party discipline is almost total. Party members vote as their leadership directs almost without exception. The great preponderance of bills, as is true for all parliamentary systems, are cabinet bills. Yet Japanese election campaigns are very much personality-centered affairs in which candidates make a great deal out of telling the voters what they as individual Diet members will do in terms of policy if elected. It has always puzzled me why voters do not find these kind of campaign speeches ridiculous since, once elected, the backbenchers vote exactly as their party orders.

There is something to be said for defining a new functional division between the *kantei* and a strengthened Diet committee structure that would give more power to Diet committees to write legislation, and that would suspend party discipline on voting on member bills. This would invigorate the Diet and would get politicians to show up at the Diet early in the morning rather than at the party's Policy Research Council.

It probably also makes sense to modernize parliamentary rules, many of which go back to the early years of the twentieth century. One such change would be to establish a system in which the party or parties in coalition that had control of the government also controlled the chairmanships and majorities of Diet committees. Under the Japanese system, a simple majority of seats does not give the ruling parties such majorities. Opposition parties have the chairmanship of some committees in the Diet today, which only obfuscates issues of accountability. On a somewhat more technical level, the system of *innai kaiha*—a caucus system in which parties that remain separate as electoral parties form unified caucuses in the Diet—also

is in need of reform. This system too obscures issues of accountability and leads to opportunistic arrangements in order to get committee chairmanships, longer question time, the right to submit bills, and so on. (Curtis 2000).

To make any meaningful reform program work necessarily involves increasing politicians' access to expertise. A system in which parties and individual Diet members had competent policy staff that transferred to positions as Diet committee staff when their party was in power would not eliminate the role of bureaucrats as experts, but it would insert a group of experts loyal to the politicians and parties (rather than to the ministries) between the elected political leadership and the professional bureaucracy.

One can argue over the details, but the point I wish to make is that reform of the policy process in Japan has two essential elements: eliminating the dual structure of government–ruling party power in favor of a concentration of power in the prime minister and cabinet, and making the Diet a center for policymaking and not just policy approval.

There is little reason to be optimistic, however, that such reforms will be adopted. The inertia created by tradition, the vested interests that would be threatened by radical reform, and even public opposition to spending the tax money that would be needed to provide the kind of staffing required by parties and politicians all act as obstacles to reform. Yet, as we see from reading the chapters prepared for this volume by politicians who represent the best of the new generation, there is a growing number of people in the Diet who are keenly aware of the need to change the system by which government decisions are made. Each of these chapters points to the need to strengthen the prime minister's leadership and the Diet's legislative role. The weakness of these institutions, it seems, is the nub of the problem, and more radical reform than has yet been contemplated in Japan to strengthen these institutions is what needs to be instituted.

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