

The Nature and Functioning of Japanese Politics

JAPAN'S INCREASING AFFLUENCE AND ITS INFLUENCE IN world affairs have led many to inquire about the functioning of Japanese politics and how one should deal with the Japanese in government or business negotiations. With the steady rise of such interest in Japan, the study of Japanese politics has started to flourish at home and abroad. It was impossible to predict one or two decades ago that one would find so many students, many of whom have a good command of the Japanese language, enrolled in a graduate course on Japanese politics in major US universities. Writings on Japanese politics have started to attract many more general readers, not just a small group of specialists in Japanese politics whose number would not reach, by any method of calculation, one thousand in the whole world.¹ In this article I shall summarize and discuss some major debates on the nature and functioning of Japanese politics with some recent illustrations. The following three subjects have been chosen: decision-making and policy implementation, power structure and the nature of democracy.

DECISION-MAKING AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Debate on this subject began with explaining the mode of decision-making in Japanese organizations, whether they be business firms or political parties. Consensus is one of the key concepts in the debate.² The proposition is that Japanese decision-making is

¹ The number of Japan 'specialists' in the whole world is not easy to determine as the definition differs tremendously from one country to another. My bold guess is roughly 5,000.

² See, for instance, Ezra Vogel (ed.), *Modern Japanese Organization and Decision-making*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975. As for various modes of decision-making and their costs and benefits, see, for instance, Jurg Steiner and Robert H. Dorff, *A Theory of Political Decision Modes: Intraparty Decision Making in Switzerland*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

based on consensus formation. This mode of decision-making has a number of characteristics. First, it takes time before the group takes its position on which most members agree. Secondly, the group's action tends to become more reactive than proactive since quick and timely decisions tend to be lost in the maze of seemingly endless deliberation. Thirdly, implementation can become steady and solid since the group's members support the group's decision more or less during the course of consensus formation. Hence, in a nutshell, the Japanese mode of decision-making is relatively slow in reaching decisions but relatively solid in terms of commitment to a decision once reached. A good recent example may be the doubling of domestic demand in 1985–89 in response to pressures from the United States, which in turn pledged to reduce its government deficit without much success for the same period.³ The 1985 Maekawa Report to Prime Minister Nakasone, which stressed the vital need for a dramatic expansion in domestic demand, after a decade of export-oriented growth since the first oil crisis of 1973, along with market liberalization, was not then widely supported by the bureaucracy and public opinion. But the report and the subsequent government effort to persuade public opinion of the desirability of its realization gave impetus to speedy liberalization. This coincided with an economic boom and the appreciation of the yen vis-à-vis the dollar, and achieved the doubling of domestic demand. The debate has not ended with this somewhat culture-bound notion of Japanese-style consensus formation. Japanese style used to explain everything. Three other, often mutually complementary, explanations have also been proposed.

A second explanation focuses on the dynamics of the governing party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Two factors are said to slow down further the process of decision-making in the LDP and the government. One is the increasing interaction between ministries and the LDP, especially its Policy Affairs Research Council, or PARC.⁴ In former days bureaucrats had an easy time with respect to their relationship with politicians since the latter did

³ See Economic Planning Agency, Government of Japan, *Keizai hakusho* (White Paper on the Japanese Economy), Tokyo, Printing Bureau, Ministry of Finance, 1990. See also Kozo Yamamura, 'Shedding the Shackles of Success: Saving Less for Japan's Future', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 1987, pp. 429–56.

⁴ See Inoguchi Takashi and Iwai Tomoaki, *Zoku giin no kenkyu* (A Study of Policy Tribes), Tokyo, Nihon keizai shimbunsha, 1987; John O. Haley, 'Governance by Negotiation: A Reappraisal of Bureaucratic Power in Japan', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 1987, pp. 343–57.

not get involved in drafting bills, except by intervention at fairly high political levels. For the last decade or so, LDP politicians based in various committees of PARC have intervened in the pre-legislative deliberation process. Symbolic of the reversal in their power relationship is reversal in the practice of who pays a visit to whom. During the budgeting process, politicians formerly visited the Ministry of Finance's Budget Bureau in order to make requests for their constituencies, whereas bureaucrats in the Finance Department now visit the LDP's headquarters, especially PARC's committees in order to brief and persuade them. A good recent example may be the Japan-US Structural Impediments Talks.⁵ LDP-bureaucratic interactions tend to slow down the speed of deregulation in those areas which affect vested interests most negatively, e.g., regulation of large retail stores in favour of small shops and cartelization of the construction market to exclude new entrants. Politicians intervene in these areas much more vigorously to protect their vested interests than when bureaucrats alone have to defend their similar vested interests. This is because bureaucrats in the Ministries of International Trade and Industry or Construction are placed under strong pressure to take into account the positions taken by the prime minister and foreign minister in order to please the government of the United States, if only to a limited extent.

The second factor has to do with the factional dynamics of the LDP. The change in factional dynamics occurred around the early 1970s. The principle used to be that of a minimum winning coalition whereby some major factions formed a coalition for the selection of prime minister and Cabinet, while other major factions stayed out of the prime ministerial coalition.⁶ With the steady growth of a dominant faction during the tenures of Eisaku Sato (1964–72) and

⁵ See, for instance, Ito Motoshige and Fujiwara Masahiro (eds), *Nihon no seiji keizai sisutemu* (The Japanese Politico-Economic System), Tokyo, Nihon keizai shimbunsha, 1990.

⁶ As for the principle of a minimum winning coalition, see Michael Leiserson, 'Factions and Coalitions in One-Party Japan: An Interpretation Based on the Theory of Games', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. LXII, No. 4, December 1968, pp. 770–87. The account here of the changed principle of factional dynamics is drawn from Takashi Inoguchi, 'The Emergence of a Predominant Faction in the Liberal Democratic Party: Domestic Changes in Japan and Their Security Implications', paper presented for the Conference on 'Beyond the Cold War in the Pacific', University of California, San Diego, 7–9 June 1990. For a detailed overview and assessment of LDP Factions, see Steven R. Reed, 'Factions in Japanese Conservative Politics', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, forthcoming. See also Louise do Rosario, 'Ominous Silence: LDP Factions Paralysed by Leadership Problems', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 January 1991, pp. 17–18.

Kakuei Tanaka (1972–74), who captured power from Sato, a different principle has prevailed since the mid-1970s, i.e., that of the ‘wall-to-wall’ coalition in Cabinet formation. In other words, every faction participates in power and enjoys the spoils. Although this has not prevented occasional fierce inter-factional strife, no faction has failed to be represented in Cabinet. All factions have every incentive to be part of the prime ministerial coalition because the largest faction (the former Tanaka faction, now the Takeshita faction) can veto any candidate that is not to its own liking, and because without joining the largest faction, the other factions cannot enjoy the fruits of power. The period when the principle of the ‘wall-to-wall’ coalition took shape coincided with that of major scandals, that is, the Lockheed and Recruit scandals.

These two scandals have tainted most severely the largest faction, which is responsible for raising political funds most vigorously,⁷ and thus effectively prevented it from choosing a prime minister from its own ranks. But even after he resigned from office, Tanaka expanded the size of his faction so that it remained the largest. The largest faction has performed the role of choosing, approving and supporting a prime minister from one of the smaller factions, except for Takeshita. It has, in addition, controlled the position of LDP Secretary General or at least retained strong influence within party headquarters. Prime ministers from smaller factions, although they are supported by the largest faction, naturally also try to develop their own power and diplomacy.⁸ Most notable are Takeo Miki (1974–76), Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982–87) and Toshiki Kaifu (1989–). Except for Nakasone, who was capable of retaining the support of the largest faction and of securing his own independence from it by mobilizing public opinion and taking advantage of diplomatic initiatives, prime ministers such as Miki and Kaifu have tended to create friction by attempting to assert their independence of the support of the largest faction. The inevitable friction and consequent efforts to be reconciled with the party cost more time in decision-making. Political leadership tends to become a rare commodity. The growing number of instances where party leaders like Ichiro Ozawa, the LDP’s Secretary General, and Takeo

⁷ Iwai Tomoaki, *Seiji shikin no kenkyu* (A Study of Political Money), Tokyo, Nihon keizai shimbunsha, 1990.

⁸ On Nakasone’s politics, see Inoguchi Takashi, ‘The Legacy of a Weathercock Prime Minister’, *Japan Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 4, Oct. – Dec. 1987, pp. 363–70; Kenneth B. Pyle, ‘In Pursuit of a Grand Design: Nakasone Betwixt the Past and the Present’, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Summer 1987, pp. 243–70.

Nishioka, the Chairman of the LDP's General Affairs Council, on the one hand, and Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu on the other, differ creates complications which slow down the decision-making process and make political leadership non-existent. A good recent example is whether or not Japan should undertake a comprehensive *rapprochement* with the Soviet Union. While the LDP's party policy platform adopted in February 1990 pledged 'genuine efforts toward a Soviet-Japanese *rapprochement*' and some within the LDP, like Shin Kanemaru, have urged greater government flexibility in handling the issue of northern territories, Prime Minister Kaifu, following the line of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, moved only very cautiously and stuck to its original position of resolving the territorial issue first while bringing about general relaxation of tensions by expanding economic and cultural ties between the two countries.⁹

The third explanation is more specific to policy areas. It has to do with the government-business relationship. Foreign economic policy often depends on the private sector if it is to be implemented effectively.¹⁰ The government does not possess very strong leverage over the private sector when it tries to encourage direct investment in areas such as Eastern Europe. The government can create incentives for direct investment by legislation to minimize risks by government insurance against losses,¹¹ but normally it needs cooperation from business. In official development assistance the government can increase or decrease its direction much more

⁹ See Takashi Inoguchi, 'The Emergence of a Predominant Faction in the Liberal Democratic Party'.

¹⁰ As for Japan's economic foreign policy, see Takashi Inoguchi, 'Japan's Politics of Interdependence', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Autumn 1990, pp. 419–37. See also William R. Nester, *The Foundation of Japanese Power: Continuities, Changes, Challenges*, London, Macmillan, 1990. Professor Ronald Dore, in his article 'Support and Be Supported', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Autumn 1990, pp. 438–45, argues that Japan should adopt a more global communitarian strategy than practised hitherto. I am in perfect agreement with him in this regard as my own writings attest. See, for instance, my 'Nichi-Bei kankei no rinen to kozo' (The Ideas and Structure of Japan-U.S. Relations), *Leviathan: the Japanese Journal of Political Science*, No. 5, Autumn 1989, pp. 7–33. But I must reiterate that my own article in *Government and Opposition* tried to deal solely with one of many Japanese strategies, i.e., Japanese economic statecraft in dealing with global market forces in the service of what the Japanese government sees as national interest.

¹¹ Takashi Inoguchi, 'Japanese Responses to Europe 1992: Implications for the United States', paper prepared for an East-West Forum Workshop, Washington, D.C., 4–6 October 1989.

independently than in direct investment. Yet, even in this area, it normally has to rely on cooperation from business. In curtailing exports of commodities the government can act only in consultation with the business sector concerned. Also, in discouraging institutional investors from selling US Treasury bonds en masse, the government needs the understanding by the private sector of probable negative consequences of such massive selling. Thus, the government needs to consult and cooperate with business in many ways in the making of economic foreign policy. This means that it spends some time on coordination with business in conducting its 'low politics', Japan's government-business relationship is often close and strong; the government cannot impose its will on business. In recent years, the private sector has acquired more self-confidence and autonomy derived from its competitiveness, especially with government deregulation and market liberalization in the 1980s. Hence, it is not difficult to fathom why the Japanese government is often slow in making compromises in answer to demands from, for example, the US government. Yet it is often pointed out that once direction is decided, then implementation is steady. A recent example is the Japanese response to the call for the increase in official development assistance (ODA). By 1990, Japan had become the number one donor of foreign aid to all the South Asian countries including Pakistan, to which the United States has recently terminated its aid due to its suspicion about Pakistani nuclear development.¹² When Western countries criticized Japan for not doing much to alleviate poverty and hunger in South Asia, especially in Pakistan which absorbed and accommodated so many refugees from Afghanistan while coping with the threat from it, the Japanese government started to donate more official development assistance. While the increase in aid was slow, it was steady. Compared to official development assistance, Japanese direct investment in the region is much less significant, reflecting the degree of government power vis-à-vis the private sector, as well as the basic investment climate of the recipient countries.

The fourth explanation focuses on national security. Since 1945 the Japanese government and people have been shy about security affairs. They have been on the whole constrained by the Constitution and the Japan-US Security Treaty from taking primary responsibility for security matters. More recently,

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, *Waga kuni no seifu kaihatu enjo* (Japan's Official Development Assistance), Tokyo, Kokusai kyoryoku suishin kyokai, 1990.

however, changes in Japanese economic power and in the international system have been encouraging them to share in more global responsibilities.¹³ Pressure from the United States, as well as a growing desire in Japan for a greater say in the international community, has intermittently led the Japanese government to attempt to become less shy of taking up international responsibilities. Yet, large segments of the population, as well as most opposition parties and segments of the LDP have been staunchly resisting any attempt to lead Japan to take up such responsibilities. Recent examples include Prime Minister Nakasone's attempt to send mine-sweepers to the Persian Gulf in 1987¹⁴ and Prime Minister Kaifu's attempt to pass the United Nations Peace Cooperation Bill in 1990, whereby Japan's Self Defence Force would have been dispatched to the Gulf region.¹⁵ Both ended in failure. As both cases have amply shown, the political leadership has not been exercised by a prime minister, in the face of formidable resistance on all sides. Reinforcing the third explanation in both instances have been the first and second explanations. In both cases, a lack of consensus, hindering policy implementation, has often led observers to conclude that Japan neither moves nor changes. Yet it would be very difficult for any democratically elected government to lead the country when there is no affirmative consensus about the direction Japan should take.

To summarize, the debate on decision-making and policy implementation has not yet produced any definitive answer to the question: is Japan slow and reactive in answering challenges both from within and without? But it would be very difficult to take that view bearing in mind the fact that the Japanese economy and society have been changing very adroitly and steadily in face of the need for structural adjustments. In fact, in tandem with the steady socio-economic changes, public policy has been devised increasingly to manage dramatic changes in demography, technology, and international markets. That means that the public policy-making and implementation process, that is, politics, has been working rather smoothly and effectively. The question arises: do the Japanese change only as a result of foreign pressure? It seems

¹³ Takashi Inoguchi, *Japan's International Relations*, London, Pinter Publishers, forthcoming. Also see Takashi Inoguchi and Daniel Okimoto (eds), *The Political Economy of Japan Vol. 2: The Changing International Context*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988.

¹⁴ Takashi Inoguchi, 'The Legacy of a Weathercock Prime Minister'.

¹⁵ See Courtney Purrington and Akira Kato, 'Japanese Crisis Management During the Iraqi Crisis', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 2, April 1991.

that in order for foreign pressure to bear fruition, domestic support is indispensable. If there is no domestic support for the kind of changes demanded by foreign pressure, the result of lack of change is almost inevitable. Thus, in negotiations with the United States about financial liberalization, the oft-portrayed picture of the United States government pressuring Japan for liberalization is somewhat misleading.¹⁶ Both Japanese and US financial institutions have been pushing for such a step, in accordance with their respective interest, which in turn both governments support. This leads one on to the question of domestic power structure.

POWER STRUCTURE

The key question posed here is whether the dominant nature of the Japanese power structure is best characterized as power diffusion or as cartelization. The question is often debated between pluralists and elitists.¹⁷ The latter argue that Japanese power structure is essentially elitist in the sense that ten to twenty thousand bureaucratic, business and political elites virtually run the country, each in turn using its fairly close-knit networks of varying degrees of cohesiveness.¹⁸ Elitists regard the tripolar networks as constituting a semi-permanent power cartel. Their relationship is often characterized as that of paper, scissors and stone. Bureaucrats may be somewhat stronger than business elites, given the enormous array of regulative and informal guidance powers of the state bureaucracy. Yet, they are not strong compared to elected politicians of the governing party since they can be vulnerable to the whims and wishes of Cabinet ministers and PARC politicians.

¹⁶Dennis J. Encarnation and Mark Mason, 'Neither MITI nor America: The Political Economy of Capital Liberalisation in Japan', *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Winter 1990, pp. 25–54.

¹⁷The flavour of the debate can be savoured by reading, for instance: Kent E. Calder, 'Japanese Foreign Economic Policy Formation: Explaining the Reactive State', *World Politics*, Vol. XL, No. 4, July 1987, pp. 517–41; Gary D. Allinson, 'Politics in Contemporary Japan: Pluralist Scholarship in a Conservative Era: A Review Article', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, May 1989, pp. 324–32; Haruhiro Fukui and Shigeo Fukai, 'Gendai seijigaku soshu, 20 vols, edited by Inoguchi Takashi, University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo, 1988–', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Winter 1990, pp. 208–23.

¹⁸See, for instance, Rob Steven, *Classes in Contemporary Japan*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1983 and *Japan's New Imperialism*, London, Macmillan, 1990.

Politicians may be strong in comparison with bureaucrats but not with business elites, since they are largely dependent on business elites for their political funding. With this kind of respective power asymmetry, the elite cartel cosily runs the country, the argument goes.

Pluralists argue that the Japanese power structure is much more diffused than is often thought and that the relative autonomy or countervailing power of elites in other sectors cannot be underestimated. Their arguments are based on institutional constraints and the autonomy or countervailing power of business, mass media, bureaucratic and political sectors. First, institutionally the power of the Japanese prime minister is not as great as that of US, French and South Korean presidents, or the British and Australian prime ministers. Japan's prime minister must work under two formidable institutional constraints. One is bureaucratic dominance in both the legislative and executive branches. The bureaucracy wields power not only in policy implementation but also in deliberation, decision and legislation. It is bureaucrats that tend to undertake the major portion of the task of shaping public policy from its inception to its assessment.¹⁹ The other is the elected politicians of the governing party who have a firm footing in their own districts, whose preferences cannot be treated lightly, and thus who can be defiant of the party's decision in favour of the district without being fatally punished by the party headquarters.²⁰ Conversely, the state bureaucracy has to cope with the intense competition among its members. Each ministry and agency attempts to exclude other ministries and agencies, whenever the latter are seen as encroaching on its territory.²¹ There is no authority above the Japanese state bureaucracy to aggregate various interests. Depending on the particular case, it is the prime minister, the LDP secretary general, the Finance Ministry (using

¹⁹ As for macroeconomic management, see, for instance: Inoguchi Takashi, *Gendai Nihon seiji keizai no kozu* (The Contemporary Japanese Political Economy), Tokyo, Tokyo keizai shimposha, 1983; Takashi Inoguchi, 'The Political Economy of Conservative Resurgence under Recession: Public Policies and Political Support in Japan, 1977 - 1983', in T. J. Pempel (ed.), *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990, pp. 189 - 225.

²⁰ Consumption tax and nuclear power plant siting are such issues on which many LDP candidates facing staunch grassroots opposition often switch from support to rejection in defiance of the LDP headquarters.

²¹ See special monthly series on ministries and agencies on *Zaikai tembo* (Business Perspective), giving interesting accounts on instances of cut-throat inter-ministry (agency) competition, January 1990 - February 1991.

its prerogative of not funding bills), the Cabinet Legislative Agency (using its authority to interpret bills as incompatible with the existing legal system), or the Foreign Ministry (arguing the primacy of Japan-US friendship over the protection of farmers) which has the final word.

Secondly, the relative autonomy or countervailing power of other elites or sectors cannot be underestimated.²² Most important is perhaps that of business elites or sectors. Although the general convergence of interests between bureaucratic and political elites on the one hand and business elites on the other in democratic-capitalist political systems is not denied, business sectors, confident of their own strength, are much more willing to take their own positions, even in defiance of the government's. A good example is the issue of who shoulders the tax burden.²³ Value-added tax was conceived in the late 1970s, as government deficits accumulated in the midst of a period of low growth and the prospect of growing social welfare expenditures became amply clear with an aging Japanese society. The Ministry of Finance sought to tax manufacturers since technically this would be the easiest measure. The manufacturers naturally resisted the taxation and demanded that the Ministry should tax distributors. The distributors also resisted vehemently and demanded that the Ministry of Finance should tax consumers, although the main burden of handling the tax was placed on distributors. The consumers resisted vigorously and were supported by a majority in the House of Councillors, but gave up their opposition when the government promised to reduce income tax and when distributors deserted them in opposing tax after the government provided the carrot of tax exemption to small businesses of up to 30 million yen sales per annum, including most distributors. The whole process took a decade, from 1979 till 1989, cost at least three Cabinets, and has given the opposition an opportunity to use its upper house majority since 1989 to block or delay government policy. Perhaps the result may have been unintended, but the point is that the business sectors are more self-assertive vis-à-vis the government than the convergence thesis suggests. This is natural given the

²² The point is well articulated by Eva Etzioni-Halevy in her *Fragile Democracy*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 1989.

²³ As for the analysis of the relationship between policy issues including tax and political parties, see Inoguchi Takashi, 'Public Policies and Elections: An Empirical Analysis of Voters - Parties Relationship Under One Party Dominance', *Papers in Japanese Studies*, No. 2, National University of Singapore, February 1989.

increasing shift of wealth and power in favour of the private sector for the last two decades. The public sector, riddled by chronic government deficits, desperately needs understanding and cooperation from the private sector, especially the business sector.

In an information society like Japan, it is natural that the mass media wield considerable power. Like the press previously, the mass media are often depicted as the fourth power but also now in another perspective, i.e. in addition to the political, bureaucratic and business sectors.²⁴ According to one survey result, the other three sectors all regard the mass media sector as the most powerful of all. Whether the mass media are the most powerful sector or not can be disputed, but the general increase in their pervasive influence during the last decade or two is undeniable. Two factors are important in discussing the influence of the mass media. The first is technological progress, which enables the mass media to reach the masses with speed, ease and sometimes even depth. The second is the steady shift of the workforce from the manufacturing to the service sectors, of which the mass media sector is a prominent one. In addition to the mass media's increasingly pervasive influence, two other trends must be noted. One is the growing influence of the government on the mass media, which tended to be generally leftist in orientation compared to the business and bureaucratic sectors. The other is the proliferation of more targeted mass media tailored to the kinds of demands which are articulated by those placed in the marginal segments of society and harbour somewhat anti-government or anti-systemic sentiments. Both trends are more or less universal in the Foucaultian sense for characterizing many industrialized societies, in that large newspapers and broadcasting stations are increasingly embedded in the larger social and political mechanism of which the government is an increasingly large participant and in that those resisting the first trend tend to be further marginalized.²⁵ How these two trends enmesh each other is not quite clear. But depending on which side wins a majority of popular support, public opinion swings enormously to the detriment of the government. Such was the case with the introduction and implementation of the consumption tax coincidental with the Recruit scandal in 1989–90 and also with the government's failure to pass the United Nations Peace Cooperation

²⁴ Ikuo Kabashima and Jeffrey Broadbent, 'Referent Pluralism: Mass Media and Politics in Japan', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Summer 1986, pp. 329–61.

²⁵ See, for instance, Sugiyama Mitsunobu, *Gakumon to jyanarizumu no aida* (Between Scholarship and Journalism), Tokyo, Misuzu shobo, 1989.

Bill in autumn 1990. One can argue to the contrary that all the fuss surrounding both the consumption tax and the Recruit scandal died down within twelve to eighteen months because the government is so adroit at coopting those opposing it and those within the media. After the United Nations Peace Cooperation Bill was killed during the autumn 1990 session of the National Diet, the LDP agreed, with the Democratic Socialist Party and Clean Government Party, two smaller centre-right parties, to sponsor a revised bill, which would exclude the participation of the Self Defence Force. However, when the United States-led multinational forces started to attack Iraq, the Japanese government decided to use SDF aircraft to relocate Asian refugees from the Gulf war with a temporary 'administrative ordinance', not by interpreting the existing law flexibly nor by enacting a law *de novo*. At any rate, the mass media sector often plays a democratic feedback role in forcing the government to modify or rectify its policy or position substantially.

To sum up, it is my view that elitists stress the well-organized nature of the Japanese establishment at the top, and pluralists reveal important insights into the structural diffusion and relative autonomy from the state bureaucracy of political, business and mass media elites. The bureaucracy nonetheless still shapes and sustains Japanese politics as the central force of Japanese political power.

THE NATURE OF DEMOCRACY

The key question posed here is whether the relationship of the state to society is one of leading society or of being led by society. In other words, how much feedback is visible in Japanese democracy? Two major strands observable since the origins of modern Japanese politics are examined here to determine its nature.²⁶ The first strand is that of the strong-willed, authoritarian modernizers of the 1868 Meiji Restoration, whose spirit has been largely inherited by state bureaucrats. The second strand is the grassroots politicians of the 1870s to the 1890s whose purpose was to defend their interests from encroachment by the state and to advance local interest by

²⁶ Takashi Inoguchi, 'The Sources of Stability in the Japanese Political Process', in Ronald A. Morse and Shigenobu Yoshida (eds), *Blind Partners: American and Japanese Responses to an Unknown Future*, Lanham, Maryland, University Press of America, 1985, pp. 43–50. For a vivid historical account of modern Japanese politics, see Masumi Junnosuke, *Nihon seito shiron* (A Treatise on Japanese Political Parties), 7 vols., Tokyo, University of Tokyo Press, 1968–80.

capturing power at the centre. To put it schematically, the modernizing bureaucrats at the centre versus the localist politicians at the grassroots have been, I contend, the two major political forces in Japanese politics since the late nineteenth century. The revolutionaries-turned-modernizing-bureaucrats have developed two seemingly opposite mentalities. Since the social origins of these revolutionaries were those of lower-rank warriors in peripheral regions of Japan, they had to resort to the revived prestige of the emperor to give an aura of legitimacy to their rule. They became the *de facto* rulers of the country with their self-proclaimed enlightened conception of national interest. By doing so they unwittingly placed themselves on the same level as the masses under the emperor. They had to represent the masses in their scheme of government, not necessarily in the form of political representation by parties, but more importantly in the form of devising public policy in accordance with what they saw as 'enlightened' national interest; also in Japan's meritocratic system the masses could also become members of the elite. Hence, in a sense, members of the bureaucracy could in theory be more representative than the Diet's political leadership. At any rate, they had to be responsive to the changing demands of the people and impartial to various social groups. Political impartiality and mass inclusiveness were the spirit of these revolutionaries-turned-bureaucrats.²⁷

The localist politicians represented the disadvantages of the modernizing and centralizing movement.²⁸ That is, their origins were either those of local notables, landowners who were heavily taxed by the modernizing state, or of unemployed and disgruntled former warriors who were left stranded after the revolutionary and modernizing upheavals. Both found common interest in asserting local interests and occupying niches of power at the centre. Both started political parties (by definition opposition parties) and stirred up the local population, embarrassing the government by mobilizing a movement for freedom and democracy. After the Imperial Diet was established in 1890, the government found it inconvenient to have most seats occupied by opposition parties. Both the government and political parties thus moved slowly in a mutually beneficial direction to accommodate each other: political

²⁷Inoguchi Takashi, 'Kokusaika jidai no kanryosei' (Bureaucracy in an Era of Internationalization), *Leviathan: the Japanese Journal of Political Science*, No. 4, Spring 1989, pp. 100–14.

²⁸See, for instance, Ueyama Kazuo, *Jingasa daigishi no kenkyu* (A Study of a Backbencher), Tokyo, Nihon keizai hyoronsha, 1989.

parties became less anti-government and eventually more or less power-alternating conservative parties; and the government was based more or less on one or the other of these centre-right parties. Their original roles, however, did not change very much. The bureaucrats remained at the core of the government in charge of public policy in the capital, whereas the politicians took care of the masses through their more personal, clientelistic ties at the grassroots. Because both the bureaucrats and the politicians paid attention to the preferences and sentiments of the masses, some feedback (with the important exception of the labour group) seemed to result, although the political style was either unabashedly authoritarian or outright paternalistic.

With the restructuring of the political-economic system since 1945, much has changed. But at the core Japanese political power has altered very little. One can make an almost endless list of new social groups and political arrangements arising out of the large-scale demographic, technological, economic, social, political and international changes which Japan has undergone for nearly half a century. The kind of political monitoring of and adaptation to the preferences of the masses which have been practised for so long seem to have become more sophisticated since 1945. And, no doubt, politics has become much more democratic. If the ratings of democracy are anything to go by, then democratic politics in Japan would be placed somewhat higher than the middle point between the highest and the lowest ranked democracies in the world.²⁹ Its style does not wholly accord with the Lockean type of democracy where contract and accountability are made much more explicit.³⁰ Much remains to be rectified or improved in Japanese democracy, but the feedback mechanism seems to be functioning reasonably well, as evidenced by the consumption tax and the United Nations Peace Cooperation bill.

I have attempted to convey the essence of the debates on Japanese politics, from three different perspectives, namely, those of process, structure, and the historical-comparative perspective. It is my hope that the steady increase in research on Japanese politics, among Japanese and foreign observers, provides a basis for optimism that some light will be shed on these problems in the near future.³¹

²⁹ See, for instance, Raymond D. Gastil (ed.), *Freedom in the World: Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1990.

³⁰ Karel van Wolfrén, *The Enigma of Power*, London, Macmillan, 1989.

³¹ I would like to thank Courtney Purrington for his help in improving the manuscript.