

# Transparency—in Action

By John F. Loughran

**A**lthough privileged to be asked to join the MITI-sponsored Round Table Discussions on Japan in the Global Community in August 1985, I admit to harboring then a degree of skepticism as to the importance MITI officials would give to the views of the panel, in particular the input of its few foreign participants. The panel members were well chosen, representing a distinguished cross section of scholars, journalists, critics, architects, lyricists, social commentators and businessmen. The non-Japanese contingent, representing over a quarter of the participants, was surprisingly broad based and well chosen; a distinguished Korean political scientist, a female Belgian financier, a Chinese journalist, an Australian economics professor, an Indonesian scholar-technocrat and a mixture of European, American and British businessmen.

My skepticism began eroding sharply as I witnessed the enormous dedication of resources, particularly the prodigious efforts of the MITI Secretariat, which Vice Minister K. Konoga had generously made available to this round table. In fact, with one exception, the vice minister and his senior associates attended every session conducted during the eight months of study. During these sessions, they were not spared, at times, very sharp criticisms from some of the private-sector commentators.

Secondly, while I harbored a feeling that the papers presented and discussed or critiqued might be orchestrated or muted, reality proved otherwise. One of the most pleasant experiences of the entire eight-month-long sessions was to witness the transparent debate, criticisms, sharp differences of opinion, genuine attempts at consensus building and flat admission of irreconcilable viewpoints. In fact, differences of view were so sharp on certain issues that the plenary session was divided into three smaller, more workable subcommittees where, to

my further surprise, debate and exchange of views were even sharper.

The chairman, Yasusuke Murakami of the University of Tokyo, and his most able deputy chairman, Yutaka Kosai of the Tokyo Institute of Technology, exercised much patience, good humor and wisdom over this long period as they and their supporting staff members of the secretariat attempted to fuse into a cohesive document the widely disparate views of the round table.

## **A** paper like no other

The final report is a remarkable document in a number of ways:

First, it is courageous in that its very concept implicitly acknowledges the need for Japan to take stock of its present strengths and weaknesses and to examine these positively in the hope of adequately adjusting for the challenges of the next few decades.

Secondly, with very few exceptions, the views of all the private panel members are incorporated in the final report. I can think of no major issue urged on MITI by the participants to have been omitted. At no point did MITI officials interfere, rebut criticism of MITI, or try to steer in a given or desired direction the main thrust of the strong views of the lively participants. Active debate and criticism were encouraged by the chairman and his deputy and duly engaged in.

Thirdly, the final report, incorporating the views of the deeply interested participants, is so ideal as to be almost utopian in scope. At the final session, many of the participants, elated by the inclusion in the report of their views, claimed the document to be one of "historical significance." As a document, in and of itself, I certainly cannot disagree. However, realistically speaking, it is so idealistic as to be practically impossible to implement fully in its entirety. This is not a criticism in any

way. Were all the recommendations of the report to be implemented fully, we would enjoy paradise on earth. However, as an objective, a goal toward which to strive, it is a heroic document and if 50 to 60% of its goals are achieved, we should be duly satisfied. After all the Romans had a very apt expression for this type of exercise: "*Ad Astra per Aspera*." A rough translation is "it is only through hope (desire, aspiration) do we (or can we) reach the stars (our objective)."

And lastly, Vice Minister Konoga in receiving the report committed MITI to its broad dissemination among other agencies of the Japanese government, foreign governments and the public of Japan and other countries. He was receptive to suggestion by the panel members of the possible establishment of an "oversight" committee which would meet periodically to measure the degree of implementation of aspects of the report itself. MITI, he assured the panel, was not going to file this report away to become a dust-encrusted and unimplemented study. Rather, MITI, in its new image, would strive to implement it to the extent possible. He strongly emphasized that this report could be categorized as "*honno*" and not "*tatema*."

A final, very impressionistic, personal note: My experience on this panel once again reaffirmed to me the existence in Japan, despite the widespread impression otherwise, of a broad, personal diversity of opinion, deeply felt and, at times, exquisitely articulated, of what Japan is, what it should be, and in what direction it should be going. Moreover, these views, some harshly critical, were accepted with grace by a powerful government body. The challenge, of course, to Japan and to its instrument, MITI, is the extent to which the private-sector recommendations, inclusive of non-Japanese, are implemented over the next few years. All in all, it was a rare and very broadening experience. ●

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