

The Prime Minister and Issues of Leadership

By *Sasaki Takeshi*

IT has long been held that the fundamental issue of Japanese politics is the weakness of the prime minister's leadership. Frequently mentioned as a contributing factor in this – which is widely recognized abroad as well as at home – has been the existence of a formidable bureaucracy with its own independent political base. A second factor is the diffusion of power throughout the governing party and the instability of the party leader's authority. The factions of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have been widely perceived abroad as representative of the situation.

Over the past decade or so, however, these two central factors have undergone a major metamorphosis. The bureaucracy has lost its former potent social influence not only in relationship to the marketplace but also in relation to the local governments. Even in the LDP, which long maintained a tacit alliance with the bureaucracy, it is now obvious that there is a dismantling of the influence and benefits that bureaucrats formerly enjoyed. This means that the bureaucracy is losing its political patrons and is in effect being left in a “naked” state. One even hears talk of the bureaucrats pouring their energies into their own self-preservation. As a consequence, the bureaucracy no longer possesses sufficient influence to resist the political assemblage within the government party centering on the prime minister.

The factions have virtually lost their reason for existing. Previously the various factions were able to field a number of LDP candidates in the multiple-seat constituency system, and within this particularly Japanese system it was possible for several candidates to be elected in each one. However, as a result of the shift to single-seat constituencies and proportional-representation election

system in the 1990s, they lost that foundation. In fact, political rivalry, which used to involve candidates of the same party contending with each other within the factions, has been changing transferring to rivalry between the political parties. In addition, Prime Minister Koizumi's so-called restructuring reform measures have damaged the structure of the collusion between the bureaucracy and interest groups and created flux in the long-standing political base of the LDP, including the status of the factions.

As a result, the political position of the prime minister has been strengthened, but the establishment of its leadership still confronts major obstacles. The origin of the problem lies neither in the bureaucracy nor in the factions. Let us consider precisely where the problem does lie.

Deep-Rootedness of the Belief in “The Empire of Legislators”

Recently the LDP has opposed Koizumi over the final stages of his central political policy of postal service privatization. It will take a considerable period of time to determine how things will work out, but what has been brought into sharp relief is the equivocal nature of the decision-making process in the ruling coalition and the weakness of functions that give rise to the political cohesion of the parties. In this situation, the LDP legislators opposed the prime minister, raising such banners as “Abide by the parliamentary system!” and “Protect democracy within the party!” (and even “Koizumi is a despot!”) The very fact that Diet members are going here and there spouting such slogans clearly indicates that the political party does not have a clear decision-making mecha-

nism. Further, they did show stiff opposition but would not try to politically settle down by responsibly changing the prime minister, but instead they just destroyed the political cohesion within the party. At any rate, the adversaries of the prime minister's leadership are no longer the bureaucrats or the factions, but rather the legislators and those calling for intra-party democracy. This is an interesting state of affairs which points to the realities of contemporary political parties, but within this one may sense the self-destruction of party politics.

The privatization of postal services is a policy that Koizumi himself advocated during the LDP presidential election, and it was certainly the most widely recognized element of the LDP manifesto in the latest national elections. Whether the Japanese public supports it or not, they are broadly aware that this is the policy to which Koizumi has devoted himself most intently. However, in the final stage of preparing the actual legislation to implement these measures, the LDP itself has come forward as the strongest opponent of the bill. Without some major change in the circumstances, this attitude would seem impenetrable and one would doubt the significance of the outcome of the party presidential and national elections. Of course, the LDP might acknowledge the error of its policies and take political responsibility through such actions as replacing the Prime Minister. Or some might actually leave the LDP and make their own positions clear and distinct. But it appears that when LDP parliamentarians talk about protecting the parliamentary system and intra-party democracy, they are not contemplating a clear political exit.

In the background of this way of thinking is a conception that the parliamentary system is “free politics by the Diet members,” in other words, their privileges should be guaranteed and left unrestricted. This is the single tacit premise upon which they operate, which is altogether an apparition of the

“empire of legislators” resurrected from 19th-century Europe. Consequently, in the sense that they would not be restricted by any political procedures, an election is after all a mere content-less battle, a ceremony in which the electorate grants them *carte blanche*. That is, whatever Koizumi advocates in the party’s presidential election, regardless of whether they support it or not, and whatever policies he promises in the national elections under the name of the LDP, and whether one may be an LDP candidate or not, there is a sense that it is only natural for legislators to have a free hand in terms of decision making and policy. They each talk constantly about their political principles, and in that regard the political parties are structurally and chronically unstable.

Hence governance by parties cannot help being fragile. In actual fact, the factions to some degree contributed to keeping the “empire of legislators” in check and providing overall government with a degree of centripetal force. With the implosion of the factions, even this element of braking has disappeared, and the possibility has increased that the political parties will follow a wandering course for some time to come. Koizumi has implemented the policies he advocated in the LDP presidential elections and in the national elections, despite opposition from within his own party, and this has been an attempt to restrict the freedom of politicians via political procedures. If the factions disappear and there is no means of putting brakes on the legislators through decision making procedures, ultimately it is only through such a system that a means will be found to solve the issue. Actually, along with this consciousness of “the empire of legislators” the fact that within the LDP some have begun to advocate a public election of the prime minister indicates grave misgivings regarding the political fragility within government by political parties. Strengthening the authority of the prime minister through the constitution and other means – rather than strengthening the bureaucracy – would

be a worst-case scenario for those eager to maintain the freedom of representatives to the Diet.

Will the Manifesto Movement Provide an Exit?

It is impossible to bring about a change of consciousness by force, and if a reform of the system does not gain their approval, the only way to impose limits on their belief that legislators ought to be given free rein is to install specific procedures for policy application. In this sense, Koizumi has already left a significant legacy. Because he himself did not have on hand such conventional forms of controlling the consciousness of Diet members as that exerted by the factions, he sought to settle matters directly before the members of the party and the voting public via debates over policy, and achieved success. In a manner of speaking, he employed the strategy of rallying support from voters and party members to impose checks on the actions of Diet members.

Until that point, the LDP had deliberately avoided raising policy packages in the general elections for fear that it would restrict future policies. But Koizumi incorporated detailed policy statements in the manifesto. As a result, the most recent general election took the form of a policy debate between the major parties. It was an attempt to regulate Diet members’ actions in terms of future policy through the involvement of the citizenry. What remains to be done now is to systematically implement such regulations within the party democracy.

In the background of Koizumi’s resolution was the beginning of manifesto-style elections at the level of local elections and the reality that disenchantment was growing among the public regarding Diet members’ lack of clear political policies and goals. There has been considerable transparency in local elections, represented by gubernatorial elections, but the elections of several hundred Diet members have been

marked by a lack of transparency and firm direction and an emphasis on the “freedom” of Diet members. This has led to a consistent decline in the influence of the central government. In actual fact, in terms of authority and revenue sources, Japan’s central government is continuing to lose the firm foundation it once enjoyed. Even the bureaucracy is beginning to feel exasperated with the situation in which the Diet members have fallen into a daze believing that once elected they can do as they please, the repeated self-destruction within the political leadership and the inability to bring restrictions to bear on the subsidence of political will.

At present, Japan’s cities and towns are experiencing large-scale mergers and reorganization, and local politicians are confronted with restructuring on a massive scale. There is considerable talk of “local manifestos” within the new elections and efforts to establish such local policy statements are springing up of their own accord. This upsurge underscores the public’s increasingly severe judgment of political performance and the notion that “politics for politicians” and irresponsible votes are out of date. In respect to these movements in local politics, the political parties exert absolutely no influence at all and they would seem to be simply standing on the sidelines staring at the phenomenon in amazement.

Whatever the case, excluding one limited corner of Tokyo centering on the National Diet building, the tolerance and support of those who feel legislators should be given free rein appears to be steadily declining. The Japanese would like to quickly escape from the argument that “how” (procedures) is equally as important as “what” (actual policy) and concentrate on debates of the latter, but unfortunately doing so would seem to require a considerable amount of additional time. **JS**

Sasaki Takeshi is a former president of the University of Tokyo. He specializes in politics and political history.