

# The Japanese Diet in the 21st Century\*

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## 1. Introduction

I perceive politics as a means to adjust conflicting interests among individuals, groups and nation states. To adjust conflicting interests satisfactorily to guide the involved parties to conflict resolutions and take steps towards new directions is what politics is all about.

-- Masaharu Gotoda, (1988) p.130.

The oldest national legislative system in Asia has reached its 100th year of existence in 1990, as the world goes through rather fundamental systemic changes politically and Japan reaches its pinnacle of economic success. Despite the efforts of founders of modern Japanese government to develop oligarchic rule rather than a democratic one, the Japanese Diet as a legislative organ did become a democratic institution over the years. □ Of course, it should not be thought of as a perfect democracy. Japan does have problems. For example, Japanese culture continues to promote social inequality as a norm while it practices more income equality than the West -- the exact opposite of the concept of equality as understood in America today. (Kuroda 1990)

The objective of our presentation today is to present some notion of two items: 1) what the future of the Japanese Diet may be like in the 21st century and 2) what we as two individuals with distinctly different values but sharing in common a sincere concern for the future of Japan and its Diet, prefer to see the direction of the future of Japan take in the 21st century.

## 2. Electoral reform

A major institutional problem facing the Japanese Diet today is how to restructure a rather unique "Medium-sized-multi-member district system." Critics of the present system attribute the inability of opposition parties to become the ruling party on the one hand and on the other the existence of competition among individual members of the same political party weakens the party system and turns the election into a personality contest rather than a contest between different policy preferences.

The government's committee to reform the electoral system has developed a plan to combine the single-member-small district system [N = 301] and proportional representation system [N = 200]. Under the proposed plan, each citizen casts her or his vote twice, or once for each system. The system is designed to eliminate the two major problems of having to compete among members of the same political party and lowering the cost of campaigning. However, it is most certainly rejected by all opposition parties whose members' chance of getting elected is drastically reduced.

In order to make the proposal attractive to opposition parties, it may be more realistic to introduce the same plan as above except reduce the size of the district to be reduced as follows: 1) the four smallest districts who currently elect

one or two will be reduced to one Representative. 2) 81 districts which elect three to four Representatives will be reduced to two Representatives. 3) 44 districts which elect five to six Representatives will be reduced to three Representatives. Hence there will be 296 elected under the new reduced Medium-size-multiple-member district system instead of the 301 proposed by the government.

In order to reduce election cost as well as make the system more democratic, it is proposed to here to randomly select 200 additional citizen Representatives at large from the list of the registered voters.

We dare propose this for several reasons. First, Japan claims to have achieved a minimum level of education for nearly every one of its citizens -- a necessary condition for performing one's civic duty in a democracy.

The uniform level of education achieved by Japan which ensures that everyone reaches a minimum level of competence is admirable. There is no reason Japan should not make use of this excellence to have each randomly-selected citizen serve her or his civic duty as a Representative for at least a term. Hence the proposed system is uniquely suited for Japan in the next century. Perhaps some orientation program should be given to these citizen Representatives so that they cannot be unduly influenced by their elected colleagues in the House.

Second, reduction of election costs, which everyone seems to desire, will be possible. The Citizen Representatives are not even elected. They are simply randomly selected by computer to serve their four years in the Diet. Employees are by law guaranteed to have their job back when they complete their term of office much like jury duty in the United States.

Third, the Citizen Representatives are relatively free from the existing power structure to act on their own conscience and to promote the public good.

Fourth, the citizen Representatives elected at random are likely to result in having at least 100 woman Citizen Representatives. This too goes along with Japan's aspiration to promote equal opportunity for all as embodied in the Constitution.

Fifth, it is time for Japan to lead the rest of the world in advancing the cause of democracy by making use of its uniformly well-educated and diligent citizens not only for its work forces in factories but in the Diet as well. Former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone proudly pointed to the educational achievement of the Japanese people. The point now is use this advantage to advance parliamentary democracy.

The proportional representation system certainly will reduce the cost of election as well as promote party growth. But there are other ways of promoting democracy as well.

Another way by which Japan can move towards democracy is to permit non-citizens to vote in at least certain elections. Eventually the internationalization of politics should reach a point where a limited number of Representatives should be elected by non-citizens to represent their interest in the House of Representatives. The history of voter qualifications in Japan as well as elsewhere suggests that the trend is towards the elimination of barriers. Citizenship has been one such a requirement which remains in all nations. We, however, believe that the removal of the citizenship requirement is a definite possibility in the next one hundred years. What can be required in the place of citizenship may be a residential requirement.

Reasons for my proposal are several. First, with the increase in economic interdependence, we must realize the limited nature of "sovereignty" in the 21st century. Perhaps the more advanced the nation state, the more its economies are integrated with those of the rest of the world.

Likewise, the more we become interdependent, the more limited will be our nation's sovereignty. An implication here is that the concept of citizenship takes on new meaning. More and more countries no longer require a visa for entering. We must adjust ourselves accordingly to the changing economic and political environment in parliamentary elections as well.

Second, Japan has been showing an increasing concern for its efforts to become internationalized in recent years. Allowing non-citizens to vote and have their own Representatives in the Diet could be a part of this movement. After all, the Diet should take leadership in showing the rest of institutions in Japan to become internationalized. And this proposal can achieve that.

Third, other nations have not done anything like this for national legislature. Japan has been bent on learning from the West since 1868 for more than a century, now it is time to start to switch its thinking. It is time for Japan to generate its own new ideas that may be useful for other nations as well. Economically advanced Japan should take leadership in showing the rest of the world how everyone regardless of citizenship can take part in deciding the fate of a nation in which these non-citizens reside. One other change in the qualification for voting is the reduction of age from 20 to 18 or younger in the next one hundred years.

These two changes in the qualification for voting will increase the proportion of residents in Japan who are eligible to vote -- a democratization which happens to be also our preferred future for Japan.

Some propose to make the electoral system more a policy-oriented rather than a personality contest. To change the system from a medium-sized to a small district system, will not make candidates more concerned with issues rather than with personalities and images, as the American experience testifies. Most citizens are not issue-oriented in most countries. Even if it is an ideal of some to make people more issue-oriented, we need to remind ourselves that people are not always rational and it is only natural to be emotional as long as we remain human.

While we agree with those who wish to make the electoral contest based on issues rather than images and feelings, the small single-member district system cannot be designed to make people more issue-sensitive. There is a need for us to face the reality that democracy does not guarantee the best results. It only permits the people to have equal access to power in that it enables the people to peacefully replace their representatives with those when they hope will reflect their interests. As Churchill said years ago, it is not perfect but it is better than any other system in existence.

### 3. Internationalization

One of the trends likely to continue for years to come in the 21st century is internationalization. Japan in the early years of the Meiji government was to modernize and to be recognized as an equal power to nations of the West. This emphasis on modernization in the 1980's was replaced by a new buzz word, namely, "internationalization." We see two major obstacles ahead for Japanese politicians as they enter into the international political arena.

First, Japanese businessmen, despite some difficulties, have by and large succeeded in achieving economic success admired by all over the world. We cannot, however, say the same about Japanese political leaders. This is not to say that they have not been successfully steering the course of Japan as a nation recovering from a war-torn economy to an

economic superpower. What we have in mind is that Japan has not produced individual political leaders who stand out and who are internationally admired or at least respected for their status as much as Mao Tse-Dung, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gamel Nasser, Fedel Castro, John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill or Joseph Stalin. There have been no charismatic leaders in Japan.

The reason for the paucity of internationally outstanding political leaders in Japan from seems to be derived from the nature of political culture in Japan that discourages strong charismatic leaders from rising above the crowd. (Kuroda, 1989) Individuals are not the primary or salient social unit in Japanese society as they are in the West and neighboring China or Korea. What is salient is human relations in Japan or the relationship between individuals in a society. Many have characterized this trend as collectivity or group orientation. It is in this regard who individuals that make noise are ousted. In the West the squeaky wheel gets the oil. It gets trashed in Japan.

Second, politics as defined by Masaharu Gotoda cited at the outset gets at the core of politics. It is the process of adjusting various competing interests to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. It is interesting to note that a perceptive bureaucrat-turned-politician like him perceives politics a means to adjust rather than, for example, a means to build an ideal polity as many political philosophers have done or a means to make an impossible task possible, as Machiavelli would view it. Gotoda's perception is widely shared by many members of the Diet, since such views seem to make up the core of Japanese political culture.

It is not any particular ideology that drives politicians in Japan. What is important is how to balance out various interests to satisfy particular groups that have access to power. The absence of ideology in Japanese politics is what strikes an outside observer. Even such popular concepts as democracy are perceived as "good" by less than a majority of the voters -- 40 percent or so. (Kokuminsei chosa iinkai, 1975, pp. 556-7 and The Research Committee on the Study of Honolulu Residents, 1986, pp. 173-4, 1990, p. 9). The lack of absolute belief in any particular ideology is a hallmark of Japanese political culture. (Kuroda, 1974, p. ) The Japanese culture seems to traditionally reject any absolute belief -- a tradition started with the acceptance of Buddhism from China by Prince Shotoku in the 7th century. Perhaps because this philosophical relativism that make the Japanese to reject such absolute beliefs as Marxism or Christianity that are more readily accepted by Chinese and Korean. □ Takie Sugiyama Lebra labels this Japanese ethos as "social relativism" which is the central theme of her book on Japanese culture. (Lebra, 1976, p. 9)

We see these as two major constraints preventing from being more Japanese politicians active in international politics. Unlike other critics of Japanese politics, we do not blame Japanese political leaders such as Noboru Takeshita and others for not acting like Western politicians. We see some functional value in maintaining these traits that appear feudalistic and traditional. For example, factions are referred to as mura or "village," their leaders as oyaji or the "old man," their followers as kobun or "followers," constituencies as hyoden or "vote field," strengthening one's electoral support by attending constituents' wedding, funerals and village festivals as tanokusatori or "weeding in the rice paties" and so on. □

While we are not for politicians attending weddings, funerals, and other events except on a limited basis, we see nothing wrong with the continuing use of these terms in maintaining the village mentality and avoiding a sense of alienation in the Diet.

Whether the use of such village vocabularies is intentional or not, it certainly fits nicely into the core of Japanese political culture. The lack of absolute values enables politicians to "adjust" to various competing interests more effectively than would be able to otherwise. As we look into the future of Japan, the more its people avoid the increased sense of alienation which characterizes so much of the industrialized world today, the more Japan will be

able to meet the challenges of the future. Those who hold absolute values in other cultures find comfort in their beliefs as they meet the challenge of uncertain futures and try to interpret what they see in light of their belief systems. The Japanese way of meeting uncertain futures is in how it adjusts itself to new situations by discarding a few traditional items here and there, and accepting elements of new values. They can do this better when they can work together to meet the challenge knowing that they can count on each other's help.

There are Japanese critiques like Minoru Morita, who complain that the Liberal Democrats [hereafter Liberal Democratic Party = LDP] should use their ruling party position to push through bills by ignoring the Japan Socialist party's boycott of efforts by the LDP to revise tax laws in the summer of 1988. (Morita, pp.36-39) Morita claims there are no reasons for the LDP not to use its ruling position to do what it can. Our position is that the LDP must exhaust all means before it railroads any bills in the Diet, for such efforts, although legal, will not help to bring about political stability.

We may appear as if we are apologists for the ruling LDP. We are not. What we fear is that Japan as a society where nearly everyone has the strong sense of belonging to her or his groups be they family, company, and school can be lost if and when the Japanese market is open in the sense that the American market is, for example. We believe that Japan's success lies in its avoidance of alienation.□ Although we are for the opening Japanese market and society for American and other foreign goods, it is not at the price of destroying the Japanese social fabric which keeps its people together. Without this quality, Japan would be just like any other Western nation.

Hence our position is that Japan must internationalize, to be sure, but it should do so while maintaining its strength which consists largely of its members' strong sense of belonging to various groups within the society.

Domestically, the Diet needs to develop a means to increase the probability of opposition parties gaining a majority. This too must be done in such a manner that Japan as an integrated society to maintains its social fabric.

The absence of absolute ideology and social relativism that dominate the way the Japanese think and act. They are ingrained in the Japanese language as well. (Kuroda, Hayashi, and Suzuki, 1988, Kuroda and Suzuki 1989) The individual, as we said earlier, is not the most salient unit in Japanese society. How can Japan flex its political muscle commensurate with its economic superpower status when industrialized nations in the world do not share the Japanese cultural trait described above? How can Japanese politicians be sufficiently internationalized to play effective roles in world politics that contribute toward peace and prosperity? These are tough problems.

Although we do not share all the values the Honorable Shintaro Ishihara espouses and articulates, the way he communicates deserves our respect and in fact his method may be one solution. Recently, we were treated to a truly remarkable display of political skill and sophistication that we have never seen in American mass media. We have never seen any visiting politicians like Nelson Mandela before in the United States. Ted Koppel is one of the most respected, urbane and experienced television journalists in the United States today, if not the best. Mandela showed Koppel that he is in charge of giving his talk -- a remarkable feat. Mandela said what he believes and what he values irrespective of how Americans feel. He played his game all the way without giving in an inch. As time passed by and large the American public came to accept him as he is. Mandela spoke from his deep conviction in such a manner that left us in awe. Mandela is a first class statesman in the world today.

Now, why cannot Japan produce an international political leader like him? Are Japanese cultural constraints so thick and formidable that Japanese can never act like Mandela? We do not wish to underestimate the weight of cultural constraints for we know how difficult it is to break cultural barriers. For those Japanese who think otherwise, we ask

you: Can you hear any difference between light and right? Likewise those Americans who are learning to speak Japanese find it nearly impossible to master the usage of "ga wa no ni o" in Japanese.

Our hypothesis is that since Japanese businessmen succeeded in becoming internationalized it must not be impossible for Japanese politicians to do the same. Perhaps one solution is to make use of available resources from fields other than politics to flex the Japanese political muscle. What are they? They are retired businessmen, scholars, and other professionals who spent much of their lives abroad on the one hand, and young men and women who grew up abroad on the other. This is a temporary solution.

Jim, you finish the rest!!

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□ We must warn the reader that there are differences in the quality of democracy one finds in Japan as opposed to the Western brand of democracy. For example, Japan's democracy is not based on the supremacy of an individual citizen as much as that of the West. Some authors call Japanese democracy a "communitarian feudal democracy." (Beer, 1989, p. 85) Ishida and Krauss conclude after editing a book entitled "Democracy in Japan" that Japanese democracy "compares favorably with the industrialized democracies" in the West. (1989, p. 327) For Kuroda's views on this, see Kuroda (1990).

- In the small single-member district system, a candidate needs to obtain at least 51 percent of the votes in the district while 21 or 31 percent of votes may be enough to win to a seat in the multi-member-district system. Thus the multi-member-district system allows a minority party candidate who can appeal to 21 percent of voters to win an election while middle-of-the-road candidates have the best chance of attracting 51 percent of the voters. It is extremely difficult for leftists or right-wing candidates to win an election in a single-member-district system.
- Observe how Chinese and Koreans have accepted Communism as their ideology in China and North Korea as the Chinese in Taiwan and Koreans in South Korea embraced Christianity. Less than one percent of the Japanese today are Christians, compared to nearly one-third of South Koreans who are Christians.
- Actually, politicians receive too many invitations to attend these events to the point that they cannot pay attention to more important policy matters. Also it is one of the reasons for the high cost of maintaining their seat in the Diet. According to the Asahi Shimbun's survey of 100 Liberal Democrats in the Diet, they attend weddings 6.6 times and funerals 26.5 times per month. They or their secretaries must take about \$70 or so when they attend such events. (Asahi Shimbun, April 7, 1989, p. 2) In addition, there are many end-of-the-year and new year parties they are expected to attend.
- For more detail on this point about industrialization and alienation, see Kuroda 1985. Kuroda presents data showing that indicators for social disorganization such as the rate of divorce and violent crimes have declined appreciably from the late 19th century to recent decades while Japan underwent modernization and industrialization.