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BEYOND GENERALISATION

The story told in this book—or rather the inside story of a political life that now spans 16 years—is neither pure biography nor pure scholarly treatise. It falls somewhere in between. It is not pure biography because it is only concerned with political phenomena. It focuses on the political career, connections, performance and activities of one of Japan's Diet politicians, Matsuoka Toshikatsu, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) member in Japan's House of Representatives for Kumamoto No. 3 district. His private life outside politics is only of incidental interest to this account.

Some may feel that such an approach will omit potentially the most absorbing and interesting details, but, as this book will show, not only is politics Matsuoka's life, but there is intriguing detail aplenty in his political machinations. The book delves into Matsuoka's early life and career, but only to provide important background details and to help explain Matsuoka's decision to enter politics. His reputation in Nagata-chô¹ for liking women, for greeting female Diet members with unwelcome comments and for sweet-talking hostesses in high-class nightclubs² are the only comments that will be made about his private predilections. As for Matsuoka's personality, this is not explicitly the focus of analysis, but sometimes glimpses of it are revealed—in the descriptions of his relations with bureaucrats, businessmen, other politicians, local government figures and organisational leaders, and also in accounts of what he said and what he did—in words that are his and theirs, not mine. Indeed, Matsuoka has both a public persona and a private personality, and the two do not necessarily match. The persona he presents to the outside world is that of someone who is highly principled, and who works tirelessly on behalf

of his constituents, supporting groups and various important causes. Privately, as a dealmaker and political fixer, by all accounts, he is completely different, aggressive³ with a reputation for shouting, bullying and violence.

The book is not pure scholarly treatise because it eschews generalisation, or, at least, uses generalisation only in order to elucidate Matsuoka's activities and behaviour, rather than as the main explanatory device. The book does not, therefore, adopt a scientific approach in the sense that this terminology is normally used. At the same time, the study aspires to be labelled political science because it analyses political events and facts, and seeks to understand the nature of Japanese politics not through generalisation, but rather through the rich description of individual example.

The methodological approach adopted in this book is that of 'thick' description, a research technique borrowed from social anthropology,⁴ which weds 'the tools of modern social science...to the artful narrative skills of the humanities'.⁵ Thick description is an approach that goes beyond generalisation and is designed to yield insights that cannot be captured by universal statements about particular phenomena. It is possible for an individual story to provide deeper and more rounded understanding than any generalisation can offer. Such an approach is underpinned by the realisation that, even amongst scholars of Japanese politics, we often know the general contours of an institution or practice, but we do not have a sufficiently precise or inside knowledge of it.

Concentrating on an individual politician is unusual in studies of Japanese politics unless the work is strictly biographical or focuses on dominant leaders or iconic figures, such as Tanaka Kakuei.⁶ Little has been written about the political lives of individual, ordinary Diet members⁷ in spite of the fact that, as everywhere, politics in Japan is shaped by human factors. As Curtis wisely observed: 'Decisions made by individuals...are the direct cause of what happens in politics'.⁸

While the book offers an account of the political life and activities of an individual Japanese politician, it is hoped that the analysis will generate insights into Japanese politics as a whole. Such insights are not explicitly manipulated into generalisations in the study; they have to be gleaned from the material that is presented. Nonetheless, understanding how one person thinks, acts and operates may produce greater understanding of how a political system functions and even how it is changing. If the book furnishes information that leads others to make more reliable, illustrative generalisations about the

behaviour of Japanese politicians, then it will have succeeded in its modest ambitions. It is certainly hoped that this book will provide a counterweight to the tendency amongst political scientists to try to reduce the detail and variation in political phenomena to numbers or to highly selective illustrations of deductive theory.

The particular nature of this study posed some unique research problems, particularly in obtaining crucial, inside information. This was gathered from a diverse range of sources: the mass media—newspapers, records of TV interviews, and industry and investigative journals—as well as from more scholarly articles and texts, and from Matsuoka's own website. Recourse was also made to the Internet where too much credence was not placed in the potentially libellous words of those engaging in 'threading', where individual members of the Japanese public can vent their spleen about public figures, such as Matsuoka, with the advantage of anonymity. At no time was the subject of the study interviewed (for reasons that may become obvious to readers); but those who had interviewed him were. The study was done at arm's length—as a book such as this has to be done.

Why write such a book? The project arose out of earlier research that revealed the importance of individual politicians in Japanese electoral politics and the influence individual Diet members in the ruling LDP can exert over government policy. The book began its life as an examination of the 'government versus ruling party' phenomenon in Japan: the LDP has often maintained different positions on policy from the bureaucracy and, more spectacularly in recent times, from the prime minister. What this early research revealed was a great deal of evidence that individual politicians—ordinary backbenchers in the LDP—customarily drive government policy in Japan. Indeed, the policy directions of the LDP frequently seem to be propelled by the policy activities of individual Diet members, who specialise in particular aspects of policy in a highly decentralised policymaking apparatus that corresponds to, and is supported by, the bureaucratic ministries and agencies. As a policymaking body, the LDP is a decentralised organisation that supports the policy specialism of Diet members and allows them to exercise their own, individual policy influence from the bottom up.

The traditional paradigm of Japanese politics is encapsulated in this structure of individual Diet member-dominated politics. The LDP is, as Machidori depicts it, 'a decentralised party dominated by Diet members'.⁹ With their

own individually-centred, secure voting bases, LDP politicians have operated as their own persons, not completely beholden to their own party, but wielding power, including policymaking power, in their own right—independently of both the bureaucracy and the government leadership of the day.

In policymaking, individual LDP politicians—ordinary backbenchers—instead of being the usual parliamentary fodder that they are in other parliamentary cabinet systems, wield direct power over policymaking and over the administrative affairs of the bureaucracy. They actually encroach on the role of government in two important ways. They are routinely involved both in the making of government policy and in processes of government administration. The former amounts to intervention (*kainyû*) in government policymaking, and the latter to interference in areas of administrative competence.

Policymaking by ordinary LDP backbenchers takes place within the committees of the LDP's Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC). This allows the LDP to shape its public policy independently. Moreover LDP politicians have behaved like individual policy entrepreneurs rather than as members of a party bound by a commonly agreed policy view imposed by cabinet and the party leadership. At the same time, individual backbenchers have exerted influence over specific administrative decisions made by bureaucracy through direct contacts with ministry officials, completely bypassing the minister. To analyse politics operating in such a way, an approach had to be adopted that implicitly recognised Japanese politics as fundamentally individually-based (*kojin honi*) rather than party-based (*seitô honi*).¹⁰ The LDP has lacked policy coherence; it has not moved as one, but as a vast conglomeration of individual politicians, each pushing his or her own barrow.

Why focus on Matsuoka? Why does he deserve 'thick' or 'rich' description? He is so illustrative of a certain genre of Japanese politician, he might have been created as a composite of the characteristics of the archetypal Japanese politician. He exhibits all the features for which the LDP is famous and with which it has traditionally been associated. First, he is strongly representative of special interest groups as one of the most notorious, influential, outspoken and colourful representatives of farm, forestry and rural-regional interests in Japan. Second, he has been implicated in a number of corruption scandals involving so-called 'money politics' that have somewhat dented, but not destroyed, his political standing. Third, he is a fervent advocate of pork barrelling, and puts enormous effort into bringing public works back to his

own constituency. Fourth, he has operated within the LDP's policymaking process as a direct and indirect representative of the special interests that are central to his electoral support coalition.

The methodology used in this book—that of thick description—can also offer insight into the nature of political change in Japan. Does the traditional model of an LDP politician still apply? Is Japan experiencing the much-heralded 'regime shift'¹² that was flagged more than 10 years ago? How did Matsuoka adjust to the reforms instituted by the Koizumi administration? Has the prototypical LDP politician been eclipsed, or has he merely found new ways of maintaining his influence?

NOTES

- 1 This is the area of Tokyo where both the National Diet and the headquarters of the LDP (Jimintō *honbu*) are located.
- 2 These comments were made by a fellow LDP Diet member, and quoted in 'Han Koizumi Giin no "Yoru no Kao"' ['The "Night Face" of a Diet Member Opposed to Koizumi'], *Shūkan Shinchō*, 13 December 2001, p. 161.
- 3 Itō Hirohide, 'Heisei Jiken Fuairu: Nōrin Jigyō Hojokin o Dokusen Suru Matsuoka Toshikatsu Shūin Nōsuiinchō no Eikyōroku' ['Heisei Scandal File: The Influence of House of Representatives Agricultural, Forestry and Fisheries Committee Chairman Matsuoka Toshikatsu Who Monopolises Agricultural and Forestry Works Subsidies'], *Seikai*, Vol. 22, No. 6, June 2000, p. 65.
- 4 Geertz, Clifford, 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York.
- 5 Rhodes, R.A.W. and Weller, Patrick, 2001. *The Changing World of Top Officials: Mandarins or Valets?*, Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia, p. 7.
- 6 See, for example, Tachibana Takashi, 1976. *Tanaka Kakuei Kenkyū: Zenkiroku* [*Tanaka Kakuei Research: A Total Record*], Kōdansha, Tokyo; Schlesinger, Jacob M., 1999 *Shadow Shoguns: The Rise and Fall of Japan's Postwar Political Machine*, Stanford University Press, Stanford; Hōsaka Masayasu, 1993 *Yoshida Shigeru to iu Gyakusetsu* [*The Paradox of Yoshida Shigeru*], Chūō Kōron Shinsha, Tokyo; Shiota Ushio, 1996. *Kishi Nobusuke*, Kōdansha, Tokyo; Arai Shunzō, 1982. *Bunjin Saishō Ōhira Masayoshi* [*The Cultured Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi*], Shunjūsha, Tokyo.
- 7 One exception is Curtis, Gerald L., 1971. *Election Campaigning, Japanese Style*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- 8 Curtis, Gerald L. 1999. *The Logic of Japanese Politics: Leaders, Institutions and the Limits of Change*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 4.
- 9 Machidori Satoshi, 'The 1990s Reforms Have Transformed Japanese Politics', *Japan Echo*, June 2005, pp. 38–43.
- 10 Tatebayashi Masuhiko, 2004. *Giin Kōdō no Seiji Keizaigaku: Jimintō Shihai no Seido Bunseki* [*The Political Economy of Diet Members' Activities: An Analysis of the System of LDP Rule*], Yuhikaku, Tokyo, p. 7.
- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- 12 Pempel, T.J., 1998. *Regime Shift: Comparative Dynamics of the Japanese Political Economy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.