

# Another Year, Another Government: Making Sense of Japan's Political Confusion

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Professor Curtis gave his eighth annual lecture on Japanese politics as part of the Center on Japanese Economy and Business (CJEB)'s Distinguished Lecture Series. He discussed Japan's current political situation, the crisis in the Senkaku Islands, and the underlying reasons for Japan's political confusion over the past decade.

Professor Curtis started his lecture with a pessimistic assessment of Japan's near-term political situation, believing that Japan's politics will "become more confused, not less": neither the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) nor the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will likely acquire a solid majority in the upcoming Lower House elections, so one of these parties will lead a coalition government. He also explained the rise of Mr. Tōru Hashimoto, the Mayor of Osaka, who has suddenly burst onto the national political scene with a charisma reminiscent of Prime Minister Koizumi. He cut pay for civil servants and confronted labor unions in Osaka, and nationally he has proposed eliminating the Upper House as well as calling for the direct election of the prime minister and transferring governing power from Tokyo to new regional states that would amalgamate the prefectures and create a more federal kind of structure. He has also started a



*Moderator Professor Hugh Patrick*

political training program (Ishin Seiji Juku) to jump-start a political movement, and launched the Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Restoration Party) to challenge the LDP and DPJ. Professor Curtis added that, while Mr. Hashimoto is attracting a lot of public attention because he seems to be a new and fresh alternative to the established political parties, he believes that Mr. Hashimoto's fall may come about as quickly as his rise. Up until now his appeal has been his telegenic image and enthusiasm for "change," but

from now on he will have to become more specific about his policy agenda; and as he does so, some of the people who have found him to be an attractive personality will move away from supporting him. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to expect that his most ambitious ideas, about constitutional revision for example, can be realized anytime soon, making people wonder whether he has a realistic policy agenda. Finally, it is questionable how long Mr. Hashimoto's coattails are. His party is planning to run 350 or so candidates in the lower house election, almost all of whom will be virtually unknown to the general public; it is questionable whether many candidates far away from Hashimoto's home ground of Osaka are going to receive much support. His party, however, may do well enough in the next lower house election to secure a casting vote over the formation of a coalition government.

Professor Curtis said that the coming lower house election campaign may turn out to be substance-free since the DPJ and the LDP are in basic agreement on key policy issues. Indeed, amidst all the turbulence in recent Japanese politics, there has evolved a striking convergence in their basic economic and foreign policy positions. Both supported an increase in the consumption tax and both take an ambiguous position on nuclear energy. The DPJ has said that it looks toward eliminating reliance on nuclear energy by 2040 but it has hedged that commitment with so many qualifications that no one believes the party really means it. The LDP leans toward a more pro-nuclear stance, but both it and the DPJ are trying to steer a middle course between the pro-nuclear energy demands of the business community and the widespread and seemingly growing public opposition to nuclear energy. And on security policy, Prime Minister Noda's decision to appoint Satoshi Morimoto, a professor and defense specialist who served in the self-defense forces and later became an advisor to the LDP, as minister of defense is a good indication of LDP-DPJ convergence on this issue as well.

There is a danger that the Senkaku Islands issue, and relations with China in general, will become an important factor in the election with the opposition parties accusing Noda of not being nationalistic and tough enough vis-à-vis the Chinese. While a lot of this may be little more than campaign posturing, it will present Mr. Abe Shinzo, the new president of the LDP, with the problem of either having to retreat from his campaign promises or accept an escalation in tensions with China if he becomes prime minister. Abe, who was strident in his criticisms of China before becoming prime minister in 2006, made his first overseas trip as

prime minister to Beijing to smooth things over. But the situation, due to the Senkaku imbroglio, is much more tense and potentially serious now.

Professor Curtis explained that the latest flare-up over the Senkaku issue was provoked by Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara's effort to have the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to purchase three of the islands, which were privately owned, and to build a port facility and establish a regular physical presence on the islands. This would be a direct challenge to China, which has had an implicit understanding with Japan that China would not use military force to challenge Japanese control of the islands and Japan would not change the status quo, which involves keeping the islands uninhabited with one solitary unmanned lighthouse and not permitting any groups to land on them. So rather than allow Mr. Ishihara to buy the islands, Prime Minister Noda directed the central government to purchase them in order to maintain the status quo; since the government had been leasing the islands from their owner anyway, the shift to government ownership represented no substantive change in government authority over the islands. Or so PM Noda hoped to be able to convince China, reportedly through back channel communications with the Chinese government. However, the Chinese responded with outrage: the Chinese government claimed Japan "stole" the islands and demanded their return, and many cities around China erupted in demonstrations, violence, and boycotts of Japanese goods. So apparently the Japanese government either fell victim to wishful thinking, failed to adequately communicate with the Chinese or, most likely, decided that whatever the Chinese response to the government's nationalization of the islands might be, it would not create as dangerous a situation as if Governor Ishihara were permitted to purchase the islands. Regardless, this issue has brought Sino-Japanese relations to their lowest point since the two countries normalized relations, and they have curtailed nearly all the planned celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of that 1972 normalization.



Professor Curtis explained some of the background of the Senkaku issue as well. Japan's longstanding position has been quite simple: that the islands are indisputably Japanese territory and that there is no dispute to be resolved. For instance, the Japanese Defense White Paper does not include the Senkaku Islands as being among the territorial disputes Japan has with its neighbors, mentioning only the northern islands dispute with Russia and the Takeshima (Dokdo) dispute with South Korea. It refers elsewhere to Chinese incursions into Japanese waters around the Senkakus but nowhere recognizes that Chinese claims of the islands as its own.



*Prof. Gerald Curtis*

However, Professor Curtis reported that there are clear indications that Prime Minister Noda may be prepared to take a more flexible stance on this issue. In his recent speech before the UN General Assembly, he emphasized that Japan is committed to resolve international disputes through the application of international law. Coming on top of the Japanese government's decision to request that the Takeshima issue be submitted to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Noda's comments about applying international law, and his specific reference to the ICJ in his UN speech, are all but a public appeal to China to request that the Senkaku issue be taken to the international court. The Chinese may be unwilling to do that, and if Abe replaces Noda, Japan's willingness to do so probably would evaporate. The Chinese would dramatically improve their image abroad if they declared their willingness to submit the dispute to the ICJ and resolve the matter in accordance with international law. Prime Minister Noda would likewise be well advised not only to send covert signals to China that it is prepared to accept the Court's jurisdiction, but make a public statement to that effect.

With regards to Japan's current political confusion, Professor Curtis outlined the reasons for the shortcomings of Japan's political leaders. For one thing, the DPJ came to power with an unrealistic goal of "putting politicians in charge" by trying to shut out bureaucrats from policy making, reducing them to clerks whose job is to implement the politicians' decisions. This turned out to be disastrous. The bureaucrats monopolize expertise while the DPJ politicians who found themselves with governmental responsibilities had, for the most part, no experience in running a government. Finally, under Prime Minister Noda, a more constructive relationship between political leaders and the bureaucracy began to emerge, but it was too late to alter the image of the DPJ as being incapable of governing well.

There are three key reasons for Japan's leadership problem, according to Professor Curtis. First, the system for training politicians has collapsed. In the past, individuals interested in politics either started at the local level and worked up through prefectural assemblies and mayoral positions to become Diet candidates, or they entered politics after long careers in the

bureaucracy. It was this combination of street-smart professional politicians and policy-wise bureaucrats that was the special strength of the LDP. Newly-elected Diet members were trained by their seniors in the factions they joined, learned about issues and made personal contacts with bureaucrats through their participation in the party's policy affairs research council, and obtained governmental experience as parliamentary secretaries before ascending to posts in the cabinet. This system has collapsed. Without a system for recruiting and training capable politicians, there has been an increase in the children of Diet members succeeding to their parents' seats and in the number of amateurs with no political experience entering the Diet. When Koizumi was prime minister he chose many such people to run in the lower house election against those in his own party who had opposed his postal reform legislation. They became known as the Koizumi children. Three years ago, Ozawa Ichiro ran the election campaign for the DPJ, recruiting more amateurs who became known as the Ozawa children. In the next election there is likely to be a significant group of Hashimoto children. But governance does not work when the parliament has too many children and not enough adult supervision.

According to Professor Curtis, the second reason for Japan's leadership problem is the skill mismatch between what the Japanese public wants and what the leadership offers. The approaches adopted by Japan's political leaders have not kept pace with changing values in Japanese society. It is no longer sufficient to be adept at factional balancing or building consensus within the party; the public wants politicians who can communicate directly to them. Koizumi stands out from the pack in that regard. Richard Neustadt, in a famous book he wrote about the U.S. presidency, argued that the power of the president is the "power to persuade." This is as true of Japan as it is of the United States. It no longer suffices to persuade the power brokers in the party and the pressure groups that provide money and votes.

The third reason for Japan's leadership problem is that the rapid turnover of weak prime ministers is nothing new. Japan has always had rapid leadership turnover, especially at times when the world has been in flux. Over the 15 years from 1926 to 1941, Japan had 15 prime ministers. From 1990 to 2001 there were nine, and after Koizumi another six. Eventually stability will return to Japanese politics, but for the foreseeable future there is likely to be weak government, party realignments, and a rapid turnover of prime ministers.

In summary, Professor Curtis stated that there are no simple solutions to Japan's leadership problems. He argued that ideas such as eliminating the Upper House would not solve Japan's political



problems, since the issue is not governmental structure but the capabilities of the political leadership. As Prime Ministers Ohira and Nakasone showed long ago, strong leaders can be effective under the structure of postwar Japanese politics. Structural change is important but often changing structures have unintended detrimental consequences. Adoption of a single member district system is a good example. Trying to force Japan's political forces into a two-party format has created more problems than it has solved.

Professor Curtis concluded his lecture with an analysis of Japan's foreign policy. He noted that Japan's conception of foreign policy is very different from that of both China and America. These two nations conceive the purpose of foreign policy as the creation of a world order that will serve their interests. In contrast, Japan struggles with the question of how to have security and prosperity in a world order created by others more powerful than Japan. It is not surprising that, with the world order so uncertain and in transition, that Japanese politics would be adrift. There is not much likelihood that this situation will change in the near future.

#### **Question and answer session:**

The first questioner asked Professor Curtis to clarify his skepticism regarding structural reform in Japan. Specifically, since there are no think tanks in Japan, and there is no longer a policy mechanism to bring the bureaucracy and politicians into a working relationship, is there space for a mechanism that could offer Japanese politicians a new source of policy expertise? This mechanism could perhaps be something closer to the American system.

*Professor Curtis replied that there is a need for innovation and new sources of policy expertise. If Japanese politicians do not want to have to rely almost exclusively on bureaucrats for expertise, they need to encourage the creation of think tanks and build a meaningful policy research capability within their parties. They also need to be cautious about idealizing the American system and then copying what they think they see. There is a role for political appointees but the Japanese underestimate the problems this system poses for the U.S. It demoralizes the bureaucracy and brings into office too many people who see it mainly as a stepping stone to a more lucrative career after their relatively brief government service.*

Barbara Ruch, professor emerita of Japanese literature and culture at Columbia University and director of the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, asked the second question. She stated that Professor Curtis' negative characterization of Mayor Hashimoto shocked her since the Mayor had been a breath of fresh air to Japanese politics for three to five years, and requested a more balanced opinion of Mr. Hashimoto.

*Professor Curtis replied that he is skeptical with regards to "how much there is there." Specifically, as the public learns about Hashimoto's views, their risk averse and conservative nature will likely win over and they will become worried about Mayor Hashimoto being too nationalistic and too radical. Professor Curtis also stated that it takes more than a media star to be an effective leader. He concluded that third party figures regularly rise up and disappear in Japanese politics and that without a strong organization backing Mayor Hashimoto's party, candidates running on his ticket will have difficulty being elected outside of the Kansai region.*

Richard Katz, editor-in-chief of *The Oriental Economist Report*, questioned Professor Curtis regarding the disjuncture between people wanting politicians who are able to perform and politicians competing on the basis of trying to make each other fail.

*Professor Curtis stated that it is in the opposition's interest to obstruct the party in power from performing. The same is true for the Republicans' opposition to Obama as for the LDP's opposition to the DPJ. The only way to overcome this is for leaders to appeal to the public and convince them to put pressure on politicians to support the government. Koizumi was a master at this politics of persuasion but it is not easy to accomplish, as President Obama has found out. Professor Curtis also noted the responsibility of the media for creating this situation. More interested in reporting political maneuvering than policy and giving excessive coverage to public opinion polls, the media has contributed directly to weakening just about every government that has come to power in recent years.*

Finally, Kay Shimizu, assistant professor of political science at Columbia, asked Professor Curtis to explain who is mobilizing voters today in Japan.

*Professor Curtis answered that the share of mobilized votes through social networking has declined, thereby increasing the importance of the party leader in affecting how people vote. On the other hand, vote mobilizing organization is still important. This is especially bad news for the "children" who were elected the last time on the DPJ ticket since their party is unpopular and they themselves do not have strong local campaign organizations. Professor Curtis concluded by noting that there is still strong interest group involvement in mobilizing voters, and even if they are less powerful than before, their work remains critical for electoral success.*

This event was presented by CJEB at Columbia Business School and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, and was moderated by Hugh Patrick, R.D. Calkins Professor of International Business Emeritus and director of CJEB.



*Profs. Hugh Patrick (left) and Gerald L. Curtis (right)*