

The Logic of Japan's Moribund Politics

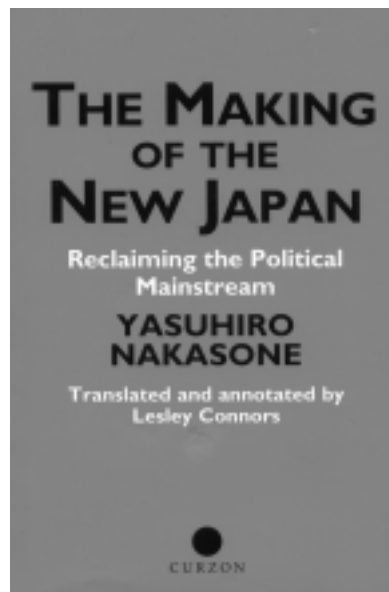
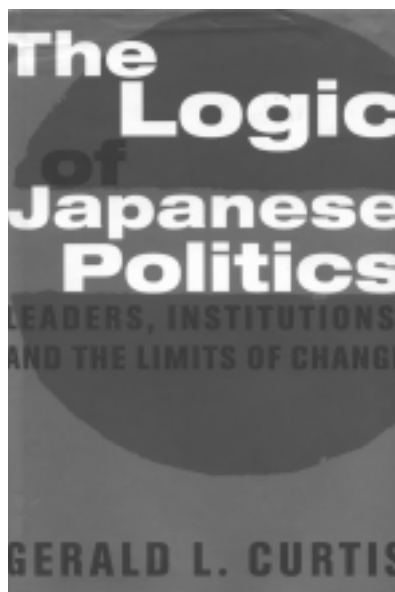
Forum >
East Asia

The extraordinary popularity of Koizumi Junichiro, who won the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election and became prime minister in April 2001, reflected the hope that at last Japan had found someone who could break free from the years of political stagnation, the brute immobility of which was encapsulated in the person of his predecessor, Mr Mori, a man seemingly trapped in the past like a fly in amber. Koizumi was swept to power by the rank and file of the LDP and in the teeth of some formidable old guard opposition. He whetted the popular appetite with the appointment of five female ministers to his first cabinet. Then, in the Diet he spoke frankly, directly, and in his own words, not from a prepared draft, scripted by the bureaucracy. Above all, the words he spoke were those of reform and renewal; of paring back the state, of reducing the jobs for the boys (amakudari), of confronting the nagging, seemingly intractable problems of bad loans and of weak and too numerous banks. Wow!

By Richard Boyd

Ten months later and the picture is not quite so rosy. There are pluses. The cabinet has approved a plan to streamline 163 state-backed institutions, but this is a diluted version of the original proposal. The challenge on the economic front is greater still; here the Bank of Japan, at his prompting, has made moves to stabilize the financial system (by increasing the monthly issue of government bonds from Y600 Bn. to Y 800 Bn. and by increasing the amount of reserves the commercial banks are required to deposit with the central bank from Y6000 Bn. to a target of Y10,000 Bn. to Y 15,000 Bn.), but few observers are persuaded that these reforms will have much impact. His is no easy task. Resistance to reform is deep-seated within the government apparatus and within the LDP itself. Fifty-three LDP members formed a group to challenge his policies last autumn. Reform means jobs lost and networks of influence disrupted, and is bitterly resented. The strength of the opposition and concomitantly the prospects for real reform was measured in the January 2002 Diet session and will be known by the time this review is published.

One thing at least is clear before then. For all his personal qualities and ambitions, Koizumi is locked into the same set of institutions and is faced with precisely the opportunity structures that constrained former Prime Minister Mori. In short, the success of the reform effort will hinge not upon its 'genuineness' or otherwise but upon the strategic skills of Koizumi and his supporters in exploiting and managing that institutional matrix. As he prepares for the coming struggle, he could do worse than read Gerald Curtis's latest book, *The Logic of Japan's Politics*; it would, at a minimum, reacquaint him with a political world he knows only too well. That is praise indeed. Too often with some of the more turgid social scientific writing about Japan's politics one is left wondering how readily the world depicted therein would be recognized by a Japanese official or politician. Little enough of this lit-



erature is read in Japan other than as a means of learning what the foreigners think now. Curtis is a significant exception. He is deeply knowledgeable about Japanese politics, indeed he is personally acquainted with some of its leading figures and can analyse it in terms simultaneously comprehensible to Japanese practitioners and compatible with comparative political study. He has an easy, lucid style of writing, and he is careful and judicious in his judgements.

The focus of the book is the LDP's loss of power in 1993 (the pivotal event in politics in Japan since the creation of the LDP in 1955), and the tortuous course of coalition making, and of parties and prime ministers popping up and disappearing at regular intervals since then. This, in turn, necessitates an explanation for the demise of the so-called 1955 system, that is to say the political configuration that emerged in Japan as the Showa Constitution of 1947 was interpreted and shaped by political practice. The lynchpin of the system was the LDP's monopoly of power. As a result, we end up with an account which touches upon much of Japan's post-war politics and which shows how deeply domestic politics were fashioned in response to the dictates of the Cold War. In the process, Curtis corrects some of the more famous accounts of Japan's politics. Thus, "the theory of the capitalist developmental state exaggerates both the extent and the uniqueness of the power of the Japanese state over the market and of bureaucrats over politicians". As for the antithesis to the capitalist developmental state thesis, namely rational choice theory, this "grossly underestimates bureaucratic power and exaggerates the extent to which the LDP can employ control mechanisms to keep bureaucrats in line" (ibid. p.59). This is a superb book. If you were only ever to read one book about Japan's politics, this might well be the one.

Christensen's painstaking study, *Ending the LDP Hegemony: Party Cooperation in Japan*, deals with similar themes but from the perspective of the opposition parties which he seeks to emancipate from a paradigm of failure, incompetence, complacency, and ideological rigidity - a laudable concern. It can usefully be read alongside Curtis to afford a nuanced account of the electoral process itself and of the enormous difficulties a fragmented opposition confronted in the 1955 system.

Former prime minister, Nakasone Yasuhiro, was equally persuaded that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new world order had great domestic as well as foreign policy implications for Japan. His call for a "Third Opening" of Japan (on a par with that of Meiji and of the "Macarthur Reforms") is the conclusion of his autobiography carefully translated and annotated by Lesley Connors. The international dimensions of the challenge are plainly indicated: Japan must revise and extend the scope of her foreign policy but should do this cautiously and with humility. The principle domestic implication of this is that Japanese political leaders must recognize the goal setting and leadership potential of a presidential interpretation of the office of prime min-

ister. Japan has no president but since, "in Japan, the executive and the legislative are in principle fused... the prime minister's influence over the Diet is far greater than that of the US president over Congress. The prime minister, by exercising his powers under the present constitution can occupy a stronger position within his country than the US president". Hope there for Koizumi perhaps, but Nakasone was, in his own words, a "foreign affairs" prime minister and, arguably, there is greater scope abroad for a presidential role than at home. His own efforts at administrative reform met with real, if limited, success.

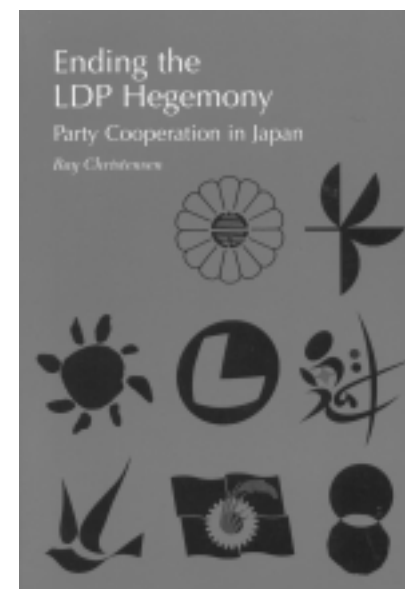
Nakasone set his sights on high office at a young age and his preparation for the conduct of foreign relations was remarkable preferring at one stage to volunteer for a junior cabinet position as Director General and the Self Defence Agency so as better to study the security basis of the Japan-USA relationship. Eventually he won a certain success in international summitry that eluded other Japanese leaders. It is all the more intriguing to be reminded of how wide of the mark his views of some of the specifics of the new world order were. He correctly divined the marginality of the United Nations, but Yasu of the Ron-Yasu relationship could not have been more wrong about the USA. It is at least curious to read, post-September 11 2001, that "with the disappearance of its long term enemy the Soviet Union, the United States too is experiencing a weakening of its own unity... it is on the verge of losing its leadership role". If a week is a long time in politics, the decade since Nakasone wrote this had better be measured in light years.

There are gems aplenty in the work to justify Lesley Connors' sterling efforts as translator. Here, self-indulgently, four favourites:

1. Nakasone's casual, but deeply revealing, comment, circa 1960 and as a minister of state, that as a naval officer, a bureaucrat and a politician he had always been on the side of the rulers and had not been accustomed to take account of the feelings of the ruled.
2. The portrait of the famous politician Miki Bukichi, garbed in traditional Japanese dress of *hakama* with *zoori*, hobbling along the red carpet of the Diet with a stick, eyes glaring, cajoling, teasing and barking at junior colleagues as he whipped up support for the creation of a single LDP out of the multiple factions, clubs and parties of the right.
3. The terse reminder that in the end, for all politicians, all politics comes back to "how can I form a cabinet, and how can I bring the cabinet down?"
4. And to the Director General of the Self-Defence Agency who arranged for the new provision of essentials earlier provided by the men at their own expense, a poem: Toilet Rolls are now standard issue
We wipe our bottoms with this tissue
With great thanks.

More prosaically, the problems that confront Koizumi are as much economic as political. He can take heart, perhaps, at Japan's earlier successes in managing economic problems. Whereas the precise contribution of government action to the promotion of growth (the capitalist developmental state thesis alluded to above) remains hotly debated, there seems to be general agreement that when Japan's policy makers turned their attention to industrial restructuring they were broadly successful. The problems were common to all OECD nations and their "rustbelt industries" (higher labour costs than in the NICs, high energy costs post the OPEC oil price hike, excess capacity nationally and globally and so on), their

continued >



Books reviewed >

- Culter, S., *Managing Decline: Japan's Coal Industry Restructuring and Community Response*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1999); ISBN 0-8248-2145-9 (pb), ISBN 0-8248-2060-6 (hb);
- Curtis, G., *The Logic of Japan's Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press (1999), ISBN 0-2311-0842-7 (hb), ISBN 0-2311-0843-5 (pb);
- Nakasone, Yasuhiro, *The Making of the New Japan: Reclaiming the Political Mainstream*, Translated and annotated by Lesley Connors, Richmond: Curzon Press (1999), ISBN 0-7007-1246-1
- Christensen, Ray, *Ending the LDP Hegemony: Party Cooperation in Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (2000), ISBN 0-8248-2295-1 (pb).