
INTRODUCING JUNIOR MINISTERS AND REFORMING THE DIET IN JAPAN

Harukata Takenaka

In June 1999 Japan's political parties agreed on institutional reforms in the government and the Diet. They agreed to create a new position in the government; to eliminate the government committee member system (*seifu iin seido*); and to introduce in the Diet the National Basic Policy Committee. This paper describes the contents of the three reforms, traces how the parties reached agreement on them, and provides a preliminary interpretation of why the parties introduced these reforms in the manner they did.

Introduction

In June 1999, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Liberal Party (LP), and the Democratic Party (DP) agreed to introduce reforms in the Japanese government and the Diet. They agreed to create the new position of junior minister in the Japanese government; to abolish the government committee member system; and to establish in the Diet the National Basic Policy Committee. They abolished the government committee member system in the Diet session beginning that October, and set up the National Basic Policy Committee in the Diet session beginning in January 2000. Junior ministers were introduced in January 2001, when the reorganization of the government took place.

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Before these reforms, there were two kinds of ministerial positions for politicians, minister and parliamentary vice minister. The government committee member system, a system introduced in the prewar period, allowed bureaucrats, in addition to ministers, to respond to questions from Diet members. At the same time, parliamentary vice ministers were prohibited from taking part in Diet debates. Further, there was no special committee in which the prime minister and the leaders of opposition parties could engage in face-to-face debates, as we see for instance in the British Parliament's question time.

The LDP, the LP, and the DP agreed in the reforms to introduce into the government as new positions 22 state secretaries (*fuku-daijin*) and 26 parliamentary secretaries (*daijin seimukan*), hereafter both referred to as junior ministers, just as the British term positions under the rank of secretary of state as junior ministers. The position of state secretary would replace parliamentary vice minister as the second-highest position in the ministry and would carry more responsibilities. The new position of parliamentary secretary was designed to provide a staff member for the minister in each ministry who could handle special or specific assignments on policy issues.

The parties agreed to eliminate the government committee member system, a move designed to prohibit bureaucrats from taking part in debates in Diet committees. Before this reform, bureaucrats appointed to government committees could respond in place of ministers to questions by Diet members directed to the government. After the reform, only ministers, state secretaries, and parliamentary secretaries could take part in debates in Diet committees on the side of the government.

Last, the parties agreed to introduce a new committee to the Diet, the National Basic Policy Committee, which they modeled after the Prime Minister's Question Time in the British House of Commons. The National Basic Policy Committee would be convened for 40 minutes every Wednesday afternoon, during which time the prime minister would respond to questions from leaders of opposition political parties.

These reforms are likely to have a significant impact on Japanese politics over the long term because they will enhance the role of politicians in policy formulation.¹ The elimination of the government committee member system means that politicians will have to become more familiar with the policies of the ministries to which they are assigned. The National Basic Policy Committee will provide more opportunities for ruling parties and opposition parties to debate the substance of policies, which will give politicians additional

1. As a matter of course, ministers were responsible for policy formulation in ministries even before the reform. The fewer responsibilities for parliamentary vice ministers, however, along with fewer positions in the government for politicians, provided limited opportunities for politicians to be involved in policy formulation within the government.

incentives to familiarize themselves with policies. More expertise in policy areas will help politicians overcome the current asymmetry of information, which conventionally has often allowed bureaucrats to take the initiative in policy formulation, forcing politicians to follow their lead. Such changes, along with the sheer increase in the number of politicians in the government, can be expected to shift the power of policy proposal and formation within the ministries to politicians.

This article explains why Japan's political parties agreed to introduce these three reforms. In the paper, the first section describes the contents of the three reforms. Then, the paper traces chronologically how the parties reached agreement on the reforms. Last, it offers a preliminary interpretation of why the parties acted in the way they did in the process of reaching agreement. We argue that they introduced these reforms out of their desire to enhance or maintain their relative power vis-à-vis other political parties. The Japan Renewal Party (JRP) and its successors tried to introduce the reforms in order to increase their power while diminishing that of other political parties, in particular the LDP. For this reason the LDP was reluctant to agree to the reforms.

Context of the Reforms

Introduction of Junior Ministers

Before the reform, Diet members in the government could hold two types of positions, minister or parliamentary vice minister.² Nominally the parliamentary vice minister was positioned second to the minister, and usually did not have a large role in formulating government policies. It is not too much to say that his or her role was nothing more than ceremonial. Reflecting the position's marginal role within the ministries, Diet members who were only in their first or second term were often appointed as parliamentary vice ministers.

The newly introduced state secretary and parliamentary secretary posts both carry more responsibilities than the earlier parliamentary vice minister position. In legal terms the most important new responsibility is that they can now represent their ministries in debates in Diet committees. Before the reform, the parliamentary vice minister could not participate in debates in the Diet.

While only one or two parliamentary secretaries were appointed to each government ministry before the reform, one to three state secretaries and one

2. One parliamentary vice minister was appointed to each ministry, with the exception of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Agriculture, to which two parliamentary vice ministers were appointed, respectively.

to three parliamentary secretaries are now appointed to each ministry. For example, formerly, two parliamentary vice ministers were appointed to the Ministry of Agriculture. Now, two state secretaries and two parliamentary secretaries are appointed to this ministry. By increasing the number of Diet members in each ministry, the total number of Diet members in the government was increased from 42 to between 62 and 65.³

*Elimination of the Government Committee
Member System*

Prior to the reform, the government could appoint senior bureaucrats as government committee members. Government committee members could participate in debates in Diet committees and respond to questions posed by Diet members on behalf of their ministers. This often allowed Diet members to serve safely as ministers even if they were not familiar with the affairs of their ministries. Ministers were often dependent upon bureaucrats. This led to some comical incidents. Once when a defense minister was posed an important question, he ordered a government committee member to respond, saying, "As this is a matter of great significance, I would like to ask our director-general to respond to your question."⁴

The reform abolished the government committee member system. As a result, junior ministers can participate in Diet debates, while bureaucrats can in principle no longer participate. Now, the bureaucrats are allowed to respond to technical and factual questions, and then only when the questioners permit them to do so.

Establishment of the National Basic Policy Committee

The third reform was establishment of the National Basic Policy committee. This is similar to the weekly Prime Minister's Question Time held in the British Parliament, in which the prime minister responds for 30 minutes to questions, mainly from leaders of the opposition.⁵ The National Basic Policy Committee is held every Wednesday for 40 minutes. Leaders of opposition parties with more than 10 seats in either the Upper House or the Lower House can direct questions to the prime minister.

3. The prime minister can appoint up to three ministers charged with special missions.

4. *Asahi Shimbun* [Asahi News], October 22, 1993.

5. Those who can raise questions for the prime minister, however, are not limited to leaders of opposition parties, as was widely believed within Japan when this system was adopted as a model. Members of Parliament can also ask questions. Further, Question Time is not held for questioning the prime minister only. From Monday to Thursday, Question Time takes place daily: MPs from opposition parties can direct questions at ministers.

Timing of the Implementation

When the LDP, the LP, and the DP reached agreement on the details of the reforms, they also agreed on the timetable for their introduction, as well as the implementation of temporary measures until the reforms came into effect. They agreed that junior ministers would be introduced when the reorganization of the government took place in January 2001. As an interim measure, party leaders also agreed to increase the total number of parliamentary vice ministers in the government from 24 to 32. They also agreed to allow parliamentary vice ministers to engage in debates in the Diet, beginning with the October 1999 session. Furthermore, beginning with the same Diet session, they decided to abolish the government committee member system that had allowed bureaucrats to respond to Diet members' questions. Last, they decided to set up the National Basic Policy Committee in the Diet session beginning in January 2000.

Chronology

This section traces how the political parties put these reforms on the political agenda and negotiated their terms until they reached final agreement in July 1999. It was during the tenure of the Hosokawa government that politicians first discussed introduction of junior ministers and elimination of the government committee member system. After the collapse of the non-LDP government in June 1994, opposition parties such as the New Frontier Party (NFP) and the DP continued to raise these issues, although their efforts were little noticed. The reforms again received attention when the LP made them conditions for forming a coalition government with the LDP in October 1999.

The Hosokawa Government, 1993–1994

Of the three reforms, the elimination of the government committee member system was the first to be brought up. After the general election in July 1993, the Japan New Party and the Harbinger Party proposed to non-LDP political parties a set of conditions for forming a coalition government. The proposal included elimination of the government committee member system, a reform aimed at increasing the focus of Diet debates to exchanges between Diet members. After the formation of the Hosokawa Morihiro government in August 1993, the Japan Renewal Party, which was led by Ozawa Ichiro, directed the discussions on the elimination of the government committee member system and the introduction of junior ministers. In August, the JRP proposed abolishing the government committee member system, to which the other coalition partners agreed.

Further, in October the Japan Renewal Party proposed to its coalition partners the creation of new positions in the ministries to replace the existing parliamentary vice ministers. The JRP proposed that politicians could be

given the new positions of state secretary and political councilor. According to the JRP proposal, Diet committee debates would engage the new state secretaries and political councilors, as well as the ministers. The coalition partners initially gave their consent to the proposal and agreed to introduce a bill to enact it in the current session of the Diet. However, opposition to the proposal soon developed among Diet members of the political parties within the coalition. As a result, the coalition parties did not put forth the bill during the Diet session that opened in January 1994. The JRP continued in vain to work on other coalition partners in an effort to realize its proposal. The Hosokawa government collapsed at the end of that April. The government of Hata Tsutomu, which followed, collapsed at the end of June. This drove the JRP out of power, extinguishing any possibility of enacting its proposal.

The Opposition Parties' Proposal

After the LDP returned to power in June 1994, political parties in opposition proposed the introduction of junior ministers and the elimination of the government committee member system. After the formation of the New Frontier Party that December, which the JRP joined, the NFP continuously demanded these reforms. In January 1995, Ozawa Ichiro, the secretary-general of the NFP, demanded that Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro have the government introduce junior ministers and decrease the role of government committee members in debates in Diet committees. In October 1996, in its general election campaign, the NFP also pledged the introduction of junior ministers.

The NFP, along with the Democratic Party, founded that September, submitted a bill in November 1997 to introduce junior ministers and abolish the government committee member system. The bill was designed to eliminate the position of parliamentary vice minister and instead appoint two state secretaries and no more than six parliamentary secretaries, plus one political assistant, to each ministry. As the LDP did not support the bill, it was tabled, and then discarded, in December.

The Formation of the LDP-LP Coalition Government, 1999

Introduction of junior ministers and elimination of the government committee member system again became the center of political debate following the LDP's heavy losses in the July 1998 Upper House election. In the election, the LDP saw its seats decrease from 119 to 105, which was far short of the 127 required to have a majority in the Upper House. The unstable position of the LDP in the Upper House meant that the government of Obuchi Keizo, which was formed after the election, had a very hard time getting bills passed in the Diet. Now the LDP, in dire need of attracting a coalition partner in

order to regain control over the Upper House, began courting the Liberal Party.

On November 19, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and Ozawa Ichiro, who now led the LP as president after the dissolution of the NFP, held a summit meeting in which they agreed to form a coalition government. In the meeting, Ozawa made a series of proposals to which Obuchi agreed in principle. Ozawa proposed eliminating the government committee member system as well as introducing junior ministers. He proposed that the members of the ruling parties enter the government either as minister, state secretary, parliamentary vice minister, or parliamentary secretary in order to integrate the government and the ruling parties. He requested that the necessary legal measures be taken in the upcoming Diet session to begin in January 1999.

In response, the LDP agreed to the introduction of junior ministers by early December. On December 16, the LDP came up with a concrete plan to introduce junior ministers, although it was different from Ozawa's proposal. The LDP included in its proposal the introduction of the state secretary, which would replace the parliamentary vice minister. Its proposal did not include, however, the introduction of the parliamentary secretary. Moreover, it limited the number of state secretaries appointed to each ministry to no more than three. Further, the plan did not refer to the elimination of the government committee member system.

In late December 1998, the LDP and the LP began negotiations to bridge the gap between their positions. In March 1999 they finally agreed to introduce both state secretary and parliamentary secretary, which would replace the parliamentary vice minister; 26 state secretaries and 27 parliamentary secretaries would be appointed in January 2001, when the reorganization of the government would come into effect. They also agreed to abolish the government committee member system beginning with the next Diet session. As a temporary measure, they agreed to increase the number of parliamentary vice ministers appointed to government ministries from 27 to 38.

After reaching agreement, the LDP and the LP asked the opposition parties to join their agreement because one of the opposition parties, the DP, had already submitted a bill, in early December 1998, to introduce junior ministers and eliminate the government committee member system. In late March the parties began discussions, and in May a delegation was sent to Great Britain to study the role of junior ministers in the British Parliament.

After participating in the delegation to Great Britain, the DP proposed the introduction of a session similar to the British prime minister's Question Time. The proposal would set up a committee in which the prime minister would answer questions from the leaders of the opposition parties. The LDP and the LP consented to the plan. The LDP, the LP, and the DP finally reached agreement in June on the introduction of junior ministers, the elimi-

nation of the government committee member system, and the establishment of the National Basic Policy Committee. They jointly submitted a bill reflecting their agreement, which passed the Diet in July 1999.

Preliminary Interpretation

Why did the political parties agree to introduce these reforms? A close look at how the parties acted in the political process by which the reforms were enacted produces some puzzles.

Unusually, the reforms were put forth by parties in power as well as, at other times, parties in opposition. Whether a party held power or was in the minority also did not determine whether it supported or opposed the reform proposals put forth by others. The JRP proposed introducing junior ministers and eliminating the government committee member system when it was the ruling party under the Hosokawa government. Its proposal failed to get the support of its coalition partners, however. Why was it unable to get the approval of its partners when increasing the number of positions in the government was likely to benefit all political parties in power? There is yet another question. Abolishing the government committee member system was not expected to benefit the ruling parties. It would make it difficult for ministers to rely on bureaucrats in responding to questions from opposition parties in Diet debates. Why then did the JRP propose abolishing the government committee member system when it was the ruling party?

The NFP, which many former JRP members joined as core members, submitted a bill to introduce junior ministers and eliminate the government committee member system in 1996, when it was in opposition. Ozawa Ichiro, an ideologue of the JRP and the NFP, had long claimed that such reforms would enhance the leadership of the prime minister and bring politicians to the center of policy formulation. Why did an opposition party propose reforms that would only increase the power of the prime minister, its opponent?

The attitude of the LDP toward these proposals was inconsistent. It was reluctant to see the introduction of junior ministers and elimination of the government committee member system. It accepted them only because the LP proposed the reforms as a condition for forging a coalition government in the fall of 1998. At the time, the LDP was in desperate need of a coalition partner to recover its position in the Upper House following its defeat in the election that July. Even after accepting the proposal, it tried to minimize the number of junior ministers that would be appointed. Its reluctance continued up until the final day of introduction in January 2001, when it debated whether it would be possible to appoint non-politicians to the position of parliamentary secretary. Why was the LDP so reluctant to see an increase in positions in the government for LDP politicians? The following section will show that the preference of political parties to enhance or maintain their rela-

tive power vis-à-vis other political parties is the key to answering these questions.

The 1993 JRP Proposal

In 1993 the JRP proposed the introduction of junior ministers and the elimination of the government committee member system because such reforms were likely to benefit it more than other political parties in the coalition government, and to enhance its power. The introduction of junior ministers would increase the number of positions for politicians in the government and thus would make it easier for the ruling parties to distribute government resources for electoral purposes. Yet, the simultaneous elimination of the government committee member system made it unlikely that every party in the coalition government would receive benefits equally from the increase in political positions in the government. The elimination of this system would simply make it more difficult for politicians in the government to rely on bureaucrats in Diet debates and make the politicians more vulnerable to attacks from opposition parties. In other words it would make it necessary for Diet members to be more familiar with policy issues.

At the time, as many JRP politicians had had the experience of being a part of the government when they were in the LDP, they had more expertise and information on government policy than other members of the coalition government. Thus, if the government committee member system were eliminated, JRP members would be in a better position to obtain ministerial as well as junior ministerial appointments than politicians from other parties. Indeed, it was reported at the time that there was concern among coalition political parties that few parties other than the JRP had politicians who had served as either ministers or parliamentary ministers, and those parties thus lacked the personnel resources for new positions.⁶ The introduction of junior ministers and the elimination of the government committee member system was likely to favor JRP politicians for getting positions in the government over politicians of other political parties. This is why other parties in the Hosokawa government did not in the end support the JRP proposal.

The 1997 NFP-DP Proposal

In November 1997 the NFP and the DP proposed introducing junior ministers and eliminating the government committee member system, in order to weaken the LDP. Given the likelihood that their proposal would undermine its power, the LDP opposed it. It is easy to understand why the NFP and the DP proposed abolishing the government committee member system. The existing system allowed politicians who were not necessarily familiar with all

6. *Yomiuri Shimbun* [Yomiuri News], September 19, 1993.

issues of the ministry to serve in the government. Its elimination would simply make it more difficult for LDP ministers to rely on bureaucrats and make them more vulnerable to attacks from opposition parties. Thus, the elimination of the government committee member system would have enhanced the ability of the opposition parties to confront the LDP.

It seems that the introduction of junior ministers, which would increase the number of positions for politicians, would, on the contrary, simply augment the power of the ruling party, the LDP. Given the nature of the rule by the LDP and the expected effect of the introduction of junior ministers on LDP rule, however, the introduction of junior ministers was likely to diminish its power. When the LDP was in power, it sought to ensure the reelection of its members in the following ways.⁷ It left most policy formulation to the bureaucracy within the government. LDP members outside the government often intervened in policy formulation as “policy tribes” (*zoku giin*). Over the long years of the LDP reign, many LDP politicians came to be well acquainted with particular policy areas, areas in which they could find benefits to distribute to their constituencies. These politicians came to be known as “policy-tribe Diet members” (*zoku giin*), which implies LDP politicians searching for pork barrels. Policy-tribe Diet members remained outside the government and often intervened in policy formulation, using their influence to pass budgets and legislation to distribute benefits to their constituencies, which would enhance their prospects for reelection. Such intervention often took place behind the scenes in order to avoid public scrutiny. In other words, LDP politicians could seek electoral benefits without being accountable to the public.

The introduction of junior ministers would increase the number of politicians in the government. This in turn would integrate the ruling party and the government in policy formulation more than ever before. Increasing the number of politicians in the government would make it clear that ruling parties that had their members in the government, and not the autonomous bureaucracy, were responsible for making policy.⁸ Further, by making it clear that politicians in the government would formulate policy, the locus of policymaking would become evident and the process would become more transparent. By increasing public scrutiny of policy formulation, the introduction of junior ministers would make it more difficult for LDP politicians to intervene in policy formulation for their special interests. This in turn would diminish the overall power of the ruling party in elections.

7. For policy formulation under the LDP government, see Inoguchi Takashi, *Zoku Giin no Kenkyu* [Study on policy tribes] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbunsha, 1987).

8. Of course, the degree to which the government and ruling parties can be integrated varies due to other factors such as how many party leaders the prime minister can appoint as cabinet ministers.

Indeed, this is what Ozawa asserted in his book *Nihon Kaizo Keikaku* (Blueprint for a New Japan). He wrote the following:

(R)uling party politicians who are not in the cabinet today behave as if they are altogether outside the government. Policy is drafted in two separate channels: the bureaucratic line and the ruling party's Policy Affairs Research Council. . . . The locus of responsibility thus remains ambiguous. . . . (With the introduction of junior ministers) the locus of responsibility would be clarified and the policy process would become more comprehensible if the politicians, who today are only unofficially affiliated with policy areas—the so-called policy-tribe (*zoku giin*). Diet members who have strong ties to particular ministries—were instead given public authority.⁹

Thus, the introduction of junior ministers was likely to have diminished the power of the LDP. It is no wonder that the LDP refused to back the proposal put forth by the NFP and the DP in 1997.

The 1998 LP Proposal

In November 1998, in order to lessen the power of the LDP, the LP proposed introducing junior ministers and eliminating the government committee member system. Although the LDP was reluctant, it had to accept the LP proposal because the ruling party was dependent on LP cooperation to get its policies passed within the Upper House. Although the LP had a strong chance of joining the government, the elimination of the government committee member system would hurt the LDP more than the LP, given that a much greater number of LDP politicians than LP politicians would be in the government. Again, while the introduction of junior ministers would increase the number of politicians, it would hurt the LDP more. This was because the LDP had a system of distributing electoral benefits that the LP did not have.

Nonetheless, this time the LDP had no choice but to accept the LP proposal, because it had to find a coalition partner. Yet, given the effect of the proposal on the distribution of electoral benefits, the LDP tried to water down the context of the LP proposal, foreseeing that it would increase the number of LDP politicians in the government who are accountable for policy formulation in the eyes of the public, and in turn decrease opportunities for LDP politicians to intervene in policy formulation as policy-tribe Diet members behind scenes. The LDP resisted the elimination of the government committee member system. Further, it tried to minimize the increase in the number of ruling-party politicians in the government. On the eve of the final introduction of junior ministers into the government in January 2001, the LDP

9. Ozawa Ichiro, *Nihon Kaizo Keikaku* [Blueprint for a new Japan] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1994), pp. 59–60.

was investigating whether it was possible to appoint non-Diet members to the position of parliamentary secretary.

Although the LDP and the LP agreed to the introduction of junior ministers and the elimination of the government committee member system, they needed to receive support from opposition parties to enact these reforms. This was because increasing the number of politicians in the government ran the risk of public criticism. For example, *Asahi Shimbun* warned

Hearing this idea (the introduction of junior ministers), many people will have the following concern. "Will not this reform expand corruption related to benefits and promote undisciplined fiscal policy? We have to be careful so that policy-tribes Diet members do not increase."¹⁰

The DP took this opportunity to introduce to the Diet a Question Time for the prime minister. This was to increase opportunities for opposition-party leaders to gain more public exposure as well as to give them more chances to challenge the government.

Conclusion

The desire of political parties to increase or maintain their relative power is the key to understanding why they agreed in 1999 to introduce the reforms of government institutions and the Diet. The JRP and its successors (the New Frontier Party and the Liberal Party) proposed introducing junior ministers and eliminating the government committee member system with a view to enhancing their power and diminishing the power of other political parties, in particular the LDP. On the other hand, the LDP and other coalition political parties in the Hosokawa government did not support such proposals, fearing enactment would diminish their own power.

The political parties fought bitterly over electoral reform because the outcome would affect their strength and power in the Diet, and ultimately in policy formulation. My argument in this paper demonstrates that the struggle over the introduction of the three reforms was the second round for political parties seeking to enhance their power, following the first round of competition over the electoral reform. Their competition for influence, which began after the split of the LDP in 1993, is still underway.

10. *Asahi Shimbun*, December 31, 1998.