

The US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program: A Personal Reminiscence

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THE ESTABLISHMENT OF the US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program in 1968 was an important milestone in the postwar history of relations between the two nations. For more than 20 years after the war's end there was very little contact between Japanese and American legislators. For seven years after the war Japan was occupied by the United States. During this time Japanese government policies were mandated by, and American policy toward Japan monopolized by Occupation officials working for SCAP, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. It was a position held by General Douglas MacArthur for all but the last year of the Occupation when he was replaced by General Matthew Ridgway.

Even after the Occupation ended in 1952 and Japan regained its sovereignty, a kind of Occupation mentality continued to characterize US dealings with Japan. The Pentagon exercised an outsized influence over Japan and over US Japan policy, and the State Department, especially its Japan Bureau, monopolized communication channels with Japan.

By the mid 1960s, however, Japan had experienced a decade of sustained, rapid economic growth, became host to the 1964 summer Olympics, and was admitted, also in 1964, to the OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, its admission signifying its membership in the elite club of democratic and economically developed countries. As Japan's economic power increased and awareness of its role as America's most important ally in East Asia grew, American interest in Japan spread, including among members of Congress.

In 1967 some 35 American intellectual, business, and political leaders met with a similar number of Japanese at Shimoda, a small city at the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula south of Tokyo where in 1856 Townsend Harris opened the first American Consulate in Japan. This meeting became the first in a series of Shimoda conferences held periodically over the next two decades. Among the American participants were seven members of Congress that included Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield who was to become America's longest

serving Ambassador to Japan, Senator Edmund Muskie, who later served as Secretary of State under President Jimmy Carter, and Donald Rumsfeld, at the time a young Congressman who went on to serve as Secretary of Defense, first under President Jerry Ford and twenty years later under George W. Bush.

At the wrap-up session of the first Shimoda Conference Senator Mansfield proposed a resolution, adopted unanimously by the participants, to establish an unofficial exchange program between national legislators of the two countries. One of the organizers of the conference, Columbia University Sociology Professor Herbert Passin brought Mansfield's proposal to the Ford Foundation where he was serving as consultant on Japanese affairs. That led to a decision by the Ford Foundation to provide a grant to Columbia University's School of International Affairs to organize and manage the American side of this US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program.

In the spring of 1968, I was living in Urbana, Illinois where I had a one-semester teaching appointment at the University of Illinois. One day about halfway through the semester I received a phone call from Herb Passin that changed my life. He called to tell me that Columbia University was offering me a position as an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and also as the administrative director of the US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program. I accepted the offer immediately and returned to New York as soon as the spring semester at Illinois ended. I began teaching at Columbia in September 1968—and remained on the Columbia faculty for 47 years—and took up my duties administering the US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program, a position I held for ten years until the Program migrated from Columbia to the New York Japan Society. The Japanese side of the Parliamentary Exchange Program was managed by the newly established Japan Center for International Exchange and its President Tadashi Yamamoto. Tadashi and I worked closely on this Program as well as on Shimoda Conferences and many other projects over the years. In the process we became lifelong friends.

Getting the parliamentary exchange program off the ground was not an easy matter. During a visit to Washington to recruit Congressional members for the Program's second conference in Tokyo in 1969 I paid a courtesy call on the crusty Director of the Japan Bureau of the State Department. He lost no time in making it clear that he was not happy to see members of Congress taking part in an unofficial exchange program with Japan. Nor did he see any value in having a "couple of amateurs," meaning Herb Passin and me, poking our fingers into a relationship that State was handling quite well, thank you.

Key to the Parliamentary Exchange Program's success was the enthusiasm of an initial core group of mostly young Congressmen who wanted to learn more about this rising power on the other side of the Pacific. Many of them later held important leadership positions in American politics, and throughout their careers maintained close personal relationships with Japanese politicians and government officials. Even now, some fifty years later, the

names of many of the participants in the early Parliamentary Exchange Program conferences are well known to people knowledgeable about American politics. Thomas Foley, who became Speaker of the House of Representatives and Ambassador to Japan, participated in the third Tokyo conference in 1971 and in several later ones. So did Howard Baker who was to succeed Foley as Ambassador to Japan. He joined the delegation in 1969 as a first term Senator, the first Republican elected to the Senate from Tennessee since Reconstruction. They and many other participants at early Parliamentary Exchange Program conferences retained a deep interest in Japan, were pivotal in recruiting other Senators and Congressmen to participate in the program, and hosted Japanese Diet members visiting Washington, and in several cases invited them to visit their districts.

The parliamentary exchange conferences afforded American Congressmen the opportunity to develop friendships with Japanese political leaders, to better understand Japanese foreign policy views, and to appreciate some of the complexities of Japanese politics. In Japan newspapers gave prominent coverage to these visits by American Senators and Congressmen, which in itself is an indicator of the absence of such exchanges before the program was created. Japanese political leaders from the prime minister on down pulled out all stops to welcome the visiting Americans. They were invited to dine at Shinkiraku, an exquisite ryotei or traditional and exclusive Japanese restaurant where geisha have been entertaining the nation's leaders, and their foreign guests, since the Meiji period. The American visitors soon discovered that no country in the world can match the Japanese in turning hospitality into a stunning art form.

Discussions at the parliamentary exchange program conferences covered a wide range of issues that were important for the US-Japan relationship. They no doubt helped American and Japanese participants better understand each other's views about trade, bilateral security relations, China, and other matters of mutual concern. But what I remember most about the discussions, both in the conference room, and even more so in informal settings over drinks and dinner, was how Japanese and American participants found common ground when they compared notes about election campaigning and constituency service.

Americans knew that Japan was a democracy, but especially in the early days of the parliamentary exchange program they had little idea how that democracy operated in practice. They were aware mostly of differences—the presence of well-organized factions in both the ruling and opposition parties in Japan and the seemingly permanent dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party, for example. It was eye opening for both Japanese and Americans to realize that they had much in common when it came to the kinds of services they provided constituents, the challenges they faced raising money for their campaigns, or the need to maintain a presence both in the capital and in their districts. The underlying strength of the US-Japan relationship is their common commitment to democracy and to choosing political leaders through open and fairly conducted elections. The notion of Japan and the United

States embracing common values can be overdone; core values that characterize Japanese society and those that are dominant in American society are in many cases starkly different. But the United States and Japan have very much in common when it comes to freedom of assembly and speech, open elections, and other core democratic values.

Looking back on my long involvement with the parliamentary exchange program I can't resist mentioning that although its conferences were serious business, they had their moments of comic relief. One of the American participants in one of the program's early conferences was a famous Senator who, had he opted for a Hollywood career instead of a career in Washington, D.C., would have been a prime candidate to play the role of the upper class handsome US Senator that he in fact became. So enamored was he of his own looks and deep stentorian voice that whenever he spoke it seemed as though he had magically transported himself back to the floor of the Senate. When called upon he would stand—everyone else who spoke remained seated—and proceed to make a statement that seemed from the portentous tone in which it was delivered to be weighted with profound significance. But it left everyone, including the interpreters, wondering what he was talking about. The Japanese listened intently, trying to figure out what was so important that the Senator had to stand. The Americans, used to his theatrics, sat there polite and expressionless, waiting for him to finish.

Except for one Senator. He was one of the older members of the delegation, a big bear of a man, warmhearted and jovial. Unfortunately, for the entire conference he managed to stay sober only through the morning hours. He began drinking at noon, picked up the pace before dinner, and didn't stop until he went to bed. He had a habit of dozing off as soon as this Senate colleague rose to speak. I have a distinct memory that invariably brings a smile to my face of his bolting upright in his chair whenever a Congressman sitting next to him or I kicked him under the table to stop his snoring.

These many years later, some of my fondest memories of trips to Tokyo for parliamentary exchange conferences are not about the meetings with our Japanese hosts as much as they are about the interactions among the Americans themselves. Late in the evening, after everything on the day's schedule had been concluded and we returned to the Hotel Okura, we'd meet up in one of our rooms, bottles of scotch would appear, and the storytelling would begin. Good politicians are almost always good raconteurs, something by the way that is as true for Japanese politicians as it is for American ones. Once started, the stories, and the scotch, would flow until late in the night.

There was an easy camaraderie among Republicans and Democrats who were on these trips. They were Congressional colleagues who enjoyed swapping stories about how they practiced the art of politics. Differences over policy might enter into the conversation, but there was none of the rancor and personal animosity that exist today. Democrats and Republicans alike assumed that compromise was desirable, and that a concerted effort was especially needed to achieve a bipartisan consensus on foreign policy.

I recall one particularly upbeat conversation at these late night sessions that captures this spirit of collegiality. The Americans had learned from their Japanese counterparts a Japanese word: *nemawashi*. The term, which originally referred to the practice of binding the roots of a tree before transplanting it, over time has come to be used to signify a process of informal consultation and consensus building, of getting things in order to provide a basis for eventual agreement. It was Tom Foley who remarked that *nemawashi* captures the essence of what politicians do to get things done in Washington, but that there is no comparable word in English. So the Congressmen that evening drank a toast to *nemawashi* and joked that when they got back to Washington they'd spread the word about the great term the Japanese had invented to describe something essential about the democratic political process. The idea of introducing *nemawashi* into the American political lexicon never took root of course but for a while you could hear one Congressman say to another in the know that what we need is a little more *nemawashi* on this issue or that.

American political culture has changed a lot since then, and for the worse. President Obama never mastered the art of *nemawashi* in dealing with Congress. Even if he had, it is questionable how effective it would have been given the Republicans' determination to oppose just about everything he sought to do. Since Donald Trump has been president, partisan differences have hardened and become bitter to a degree unimaginable to previous generations. Negative campaigning and a penchant to seek showdowns rather than compromise, to score political points rather than seek feasible if less than perfect policy solutions, have become all too prominent a feature of American political life. It is a far cry from the relaxed interchange and friendships among politicians on opposite sides of the aisle that I witnessed decades ago.

It should come as no surprise that as the bilateral US-Japan relationship deepened and matured and as channels of communication involving Japanese and American legislators multiplied, the importance of the parliamentary exchange program to the US-Japan relationship declined. There are now many opportunities for Congressmen to interact with their Japanese counterparts. The bilateral relationship has become so complex and multifaceted that interchange between members of Congress and the Diet tend to hone in on specific specialized areas of mutual concern rather than on a more general overview of the relationship as was true in the past. There is little reason for concern that Japan and the United States might drift apart and a tendency, not only in Congress but in the US generally, to take the stability of the relationship for granted. Japan is a strong ally, grass roots relations are extensive, and there is a robust trade relationship and Japanese investment in the United States economy. It is difficult to generate a lot of interest among politicians about a relationship that is as solid and where problems are as manageable as is the case with America's relations with Japan.

The Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE), the organization that has managed the Japanese side of the parliamentary exchange program since its inception, and its American

partner JCIE/USA, a sister organization to Japan's JCIE founded by Tadashi Yamamoto in 1975, continue to support programs that bring American and Japanese legislators together. They are playing an especially important role in organizing visits by Japanese parliamentarians to Washington. In recent years the Mansfield Foundation, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, the Japanese Embassy in Washington, and other organizations have sponsored programs involving US-Japan legislative exchange. They involve far fewer participants than took part in the early decades of the parliamentary exchange program and unsurprisingly they do not draw the press attention that greeted those early meetings.

I look back on the fifty-year history of this exchange program and on Tadashi Yamamoto's, Herb Passin's, and my involvement in it with a sense of gratitude for having been given the opportunity to get to know so many important and admirable politicians in both countries, to have been able to work so closely and with so much pleasure with Tadashi and Herb Passin, to gain insights into the bilateral relationship, and to have been able to watch the US-Japan relationship grow and deepen and become one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. I have nothing but admiration for Hideko Katsumata, the Executive Director of JCIE who has been with the organization since its beginnings, and the other staff members of JCIE who have worked with such extraordinary dedication to build strong programs and strengthen relationships between Japan and the United States. And I appreciate this opportunity to put down on paper a few of my memories of the US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program.