

## QUESTIONING THE GODS

### Questions from overseas about the Japanese Civil Service

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Historically in Japan elite civil servants have been 'godlike' human beings as suggested in the retirement phrase of 'amakudari' - descent from heaven. Foreign scholars however in recent years have suggested that this status is questionable and that bureaucratic power has been overstated and insufficient attention given to the power of industry and the LDP policy study group - the 'zoku'.

The 1990s have brought new questions for the civil service with the end of old postwar certainties such as the removal of the LDP government and the change from economic growth to prolonged recession. With the end of LDP power in 1993 the bureaucracy have new opportunities to exert more influence over inexperienced prime ministers and ministers. Yet the new ministers have shown their power over promotions.

The most prestigious Ministry of Finance is open to question over the monitoring and control of the economy and financial institutions during the bubble economy of the 1980s and into the recession of the 1990s. Questions must also be asked about the preparations and response to the Kobe earthquake especially when the recommendations of the Administrative Reform Commission on disasters appear not to have been implemented.

The behavior of the Police Agency, the Education and Health and Welfare ministries in the 1990s suggest that the ongoing lessons of Minamata disease and Narita Airport have not been learnt. There has been poor and insensitive management, cover up, slow and inefficient responses to needs, agency rivalry and the plac-

ing of private interests before public interests.

Two basics of the public sector which have been questioned by reform commissions since the end of World War Two are the dominant dysfunctional sectionalism found among public organisations, and the lack of leadership. These factors reflect the political and administrative culture and so are difficult to change.

The basic question for the civil service is whether it can be reformed sufficiently for it to meet the needs of Japan today and for the future. The response so far however has been inadequate, apart from the privatisation of the national railways (JNR). This situation will continue until the system within which the bureaucracy must operate is more open and responsive to the needs of the society. The civil service alone is not able to provide the leadership and vision needed to maintain Japan's present position into the 21st century.

(Lecture in English)