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BRITISH POLITICS AFTER LABOR – WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM BRITISH EXPERIENCES?

Yuichi Hosoya

Politics requires boldness, innovation and stability – all are essential. The art of politics is determining the right balance among these. A stable power base and long-term strategic policy is what enables bold reform. Bold reform, for its part, enables the government to overcome serious problems it faces and garner public support to win elections, contributing to the establishment of a long-term stable administration. This is exactly what the British government is doing at the moment.

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In order to alleviate what is considered the worst budget deficit since World War II, it is necessary to implement drastic reforms, including tax increases and cuts in expenditures, which might draw public criticism. It is also necessary to assemble a broad range of political forces to carry out such reforms.

The Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats because it would be impossible for a minority government to carry out drastic reform. It was the first formal coalition in Britain since Winston Churchill forged a government of national unity at the height of World War II in May 1940. It attests to how seriously the Cameron cabinet is taking the current crisis. When Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg joined the coalition as Deputy Prime Minister on May 12, 2010, he proclaimed, "National interest is more important than party interest." By national interest, he meant first of all the reduction of the budget deficit and the return of the British economy to health. He knew too well that there was strong opposition within his party to joining forces with the Conservatives. *The Times* stated in its May 12 editorial that this coalition was the best option for the country. Behind this lies the mutual trust between Conservative Cameron and Liberal Democrat Clegg, both party leaders aged 43. Furthermore, by pledging not to call a general election for five years (until May 2015), the two parties agreed to restrain themselves from pursuing short-term party interests. Faced with harsh criticism, though, the two leaders with relatively little experience in politics are working in tandem to overcome the serious crisis in British politics.

Over a year has passed since Cameron became British Prime Minister on May 11, 2010. Assuming the premiership at the age of 43, Cameron was born in 1966 when Labor Leader Harold Wilson was serving as PM. Cameron is the seventh PM since then. During the same period of time, Japan has witnessed 23 prime ministers. It is virtually unthinkable for this country to have a prime minister in his 40s. Indeed, 16 of these 23 PMs were in their 60s when they assumed the office of prime minister. In short, a Japanese prime minister is relatively old and stays in office for less than two years on average.

This fact makes the burden of being prime minister all the weightier, making it difficult for the prime minister to establish his presence in today's world,


where he is required to travel overseas more often than before to meet his counterparts. It will also be difficult for him to bear down on the opposition and force through robust and innovative reforms at home. That's why Japanese politics is lacking in vitality, boldness and stability. A change of prime minister occurs in Japan before one can cultivate friendships with the leaders of great powers such as the United States, Britain and France at G7/8 and other summit meetings. How can he increase Japan's influence in summit diplomacy under such circumstances?

Japan is plagued with political corruption where short-term speculation erodes long-term national interests. Although many in the political class recognize the need to build a stable political base by forming a broad-based coalition, they are unable to put the idea into execution. Due to the lack of strong political leadership as well as the lack of a political base to realize it, various opinions emerging from within never converge, resulting in repeated futile political swings. There is no better time than now for Japan to assemble broad political forces and present a long-term reconstruction plan, as the country has come through the tragedy of a massive earthquake and tsunami on a scale it has never experienced in its modern history, and the radiation leaks from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant is causing the Japanese people considerable anxiety. However, things are not proceeding in that direction.

The Cameron government has implemented bold reform in foreign policy, too. Soon after forging the coalition, Cameron set up the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss security issues. This has two connotations. The first is an antithesis to the Labor government of Tony Blair. Blair was severely criticized for having surrounded his office with his close friends and aides to bypass the Cabinet in decision making. With the progress of "presidentialization," a prime minister is increasingly required to react swiftly on the back of stronger authority. However the prime minister must exercise his authority through appropriate political processes and in an accountable manner. The establishment of the NSC was based on such an idea. The second is a practical necessity. Under the Blair government, the British Army became increasingly involved in foreign wars such as those in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It was necessary for the Cameron

government to examine these cases and draw up an effective long-term strategy. At the same time, however, the government needed to cut back on the defense budget in order to alleviate the budget deficit. It was thus perceived as necessary to institutionalize the existing national security apparatus into the NSC in order to carry out a new British national security strategy from a comprehensive long-term perspective.

After a five-month intensive discussion, the British NSC released on October 19 a new defense guideline, *Strategic Defense and Security Review*. It was the first update of the country's basic defense strategy in 13 years since the start of Blair's Labor administration. It specifically aims at an 8% reduction in the defense budget over four years with a list of various measures to cut back the bloated defense budget. Although the three branches of the military are unhappy with the plan, such fiscal austerity will only be achieved under strong political leadership.

The level of Japan's crisis is no doubt serious, when we consider the serious budget deficit, China's rapid military rise, and territorial frictions with neighboring countries, let alone the triple disaster of the earthquake, the tsunami, and the accident at the nuclear power plant. It goes without saying that stable, strong political leadership is needed to overcome the crisis. Japan has tended to prioritize the particular interests of ministries or the military in recent history as it did in the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, at the start of the war on China and during World War II. Japan's politicians have rarely exercised strong leadership that takes into account the long-term interests of Japan as a whole and put into execution policies to secure these interests. The weakness of its politics lies at the root of Japan's problem. It is time for Japan to learn the lessons of how Britain has overcome crises and to seriously consider measures to establish strong leadership. 

Yuichi Hosoya is Professor of International Politics at Keio University.