

## **Pride of Municipal Officials as Staff of “Citizen's Government”**

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### **The Position of Local Government Officials**

At the 20th anniversary conference of the Local Government Studies Society (LGSS) held in Yokohama in 2006, I proposed that local governments are the "Citizen's Government" and that members of LGSS are expected to conduct their research and practices with this as their goal. "Citizen's" refers to the ownership by citizens. "For the citizens" is said by anyone, and "by the citizens" has been recognized through various citizens' participation and voluntary activities. Although municipalities cannot yet be said to be "owned" by citizens, we should achieve over time. It took nearly 20 years to take root for the word "local government," which is now commonly used.

Local government employees naturally become staff members of the "citizen's government." They should possess the necessary skills, and take pride in their work. Until now, local government employees have been treated as if they were an outpost of central government ministries, and the employees have taken it in stride. Even competent staff members would say without hesitation, "I'm going to the main government office." Local governments do not have their superior ministries, and without waiting for the "Law on Decentralization 2000", the Constitution of Japan guarantees local governments an equal status with the central government. They are established by local citizens and independent of the central government.

### **The Pleasure of being Local Government Officials**

Citizen's government takes the will of its citizens into account, and proactively formulates and implements policies that encompass the whole and the future of their lives, which is difficult for individual citizens to conceive of. Policies enacted by the central government are to be implemented so far as they are necessary and effective for the community, and should not be implemented mechanically. They may use their own ingenuity when managing the implementation. For region-specific problems, they must formulate and implement policies by themselves.

In developing countries, it was rather efficient for the central government to formulate uniform policies and raise national standards uniformly. After the Meiji Restoration since human resources were scarce, the minimum conditions such as education, railroads, roads, and urban facilities were first developed under a centralized system. Today, as Japan has become a matured country, its local conditions vary widely and should not be treated uniformly.

Rather than building a school like inorganic, characterless boxes based on the stereotyped standards of the Ministry of Education, it would be better to give schools a freedom to choose unique appearance tailored to the local community. If the school can be designed by incorporating the local characters, people will feel attached to the school. Enforcing a uniform national standard is problematic. While it is necessary to standardize the language, local history and culture should be respected more. Nationwide uniform standards are necessary for vehicle operation rules, but we would like to see a variety of innovations such as wider sidewalks, trees, and street furniture.

If local governments unconsciously follow the laws and directives of the central government directives, they would not need staff. That would only produce a boring town. By implementing various innovations in each region, a unique "town" will be created. Citizens who participate in the project

will be motivated to have wisdom and a sense of responsibility. The staff of local governments will be motivated and creative, and its workplace will be vibrant and fun.

### **Duties of Local Government Officials**

If this is the case, they must take responsibility for their own actions. They cannot escape from the situation by saying, as they have done in the past, that "the law says so," or that "I was only following the instructions of the higher authorities and it was not my responsibility." In fact, for municipalities, there is no such thing as a higher authority. The form of self-governance is to decide by oneself and take responsibility for one's own actions, even if they are small.

Today, international cooperation is required, and the European Union has emerged as a near-universal federation of nations, removing national boundaries. However, this was preceded in 1985 by the creation of the "Charter of European Local Self-Government," which recognized and strengthened the role of basic local governments. The formation of nation-states lasted at most 200 years. Although the world is moving toward broadening its boundaries after that era, basic local governments have not disappeared since the beginning of human collective life. As internationalization and globalization progress, individuals are becoming increasingly isolated and trivialized. There is no government other than basic local governments that can provide close support for their lives.

### **Roots of Expertise**

Citizens elect their own mayors who appoint officials working for "citizens' government." However, mayors need not be experts in local government. Without losing their excellent civic sense, their role is to bring the winds of citizens into an organization that becomes stiff and loses motivation, and to launch new movements. Therefore, the mayor hires experts in government administration and administrative staff members. These are the employees of the municipality who are guaranteed status and can make full use of their expertise.

However, expertise is not confined to a narrow, traditional field. Municipal officials are professionals who are civic-minded employees, meaning that they first face citizens and understand their intentions, and then persuade them through dialogue to create better answers, not only for their individual interests, but also for the future. Only on this basis the various conventional expertise and techniques can be used. Some officials have said, "Laypeople should stay out of it," but it is the citizens as laypeople and officials of other departments, who are more open and honest in their questioning. The expertise of the citizens is used in a timely manner, as well.

Since citizen government is an organization, employees are assigned to various fields. Very few can work in departments that handle the whole. Even though they may be charged with a narrow field, the work of the community is always connected to the whole. Regardless of the assigned field, they must always consider the lives of citizens and the whole region.

In the days of local administration as a subcontractor of the central government, we were only able to do rigid, vertically-divided work, but in a "citizen's government," we can freely consider the relationship with other fields and carry it out together with the citizens. This would make work more enjoyable and creative, and would give officials a sense of pride in their work.

### **Is the Institutional Barrier absolute?**

Looking at the current local governments, people may say that they are not yet "citizen's government," even when it comes to fiscal issues alone. Others say that it is still the same as ever, although the Law on Decentralization has been enacted. It is necessary to continuously enhance the institutional autonomy of local governments in terms of administration and finance.

However, it is not right to say that they cannot move without firstly reforming the system. Even when there was no discussion of decentralization and the system did not allow much more autonomy 40 years ago, the city of Yokohama acted as a "citizen's government" on the city management and achieved results in opposition to the national government. The reason why Yokohama was not defeated in discussions with the national government was because it was able to stand in the shoes of local citizens and grasp the local community from a comprehensive perspective. The results of these efforts were the catalyst for the current trend toward decentralization. Institutional reform is necessary, but the first step is for the local government leaders to take the leadership. Following the leadership, the staff become conscious and proactive to make considerable works possible.

### **Believe in and utilize the power of people**

It is not from institutional reforms that things move, but from the voluntary activities of people who are aware of what they are doing. "Citizen's government" can be more powerful than a system if it is open enough to citizens and if it has their trust. Instead of complaining the current situation, local government officials should first take pride in their role as "citizen's government" officials and take action.

"Citizen's government" is established by mature citizens, but at present, it cannot be said that citizens have been sufficiently nurtured yet. Some officials may be pushed around by immature citizens. However, cities are always subject to various conflicts and contradictions. The staff must patiently work to find points of harmony from the same vantage point as citizens do. In this way, both citizens and employees can grow as citizens.

I hope that local government officials will be aware that they are staff members of a "citizen's government," and work tenaciously. Their work should be enjoyable, not only for the people of the present, but also for the people of the past and future, to maintain and improve human life and to make the community unique. It is people's power that makes a true "citizen's government". Full-time employees play an important role.

Reference: Akira Tamura, "Citizen's Government Theory" (Seikatsu-sha, Tokyo, 2006)