CONSENSUS IN CONFLICT: COMPETING CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF JAPANESE POLITICS IN THE POSTWAR ERA

The events of 1993 can be seen to be indicative of a fundamental change in the nature of Japanese politics. In the postwar era Japanese politics can be seen to have been characterised by two competing visions of the polity — ‘the constitutional’ and ‘the bureaucratic’. Each of these visions were underpinned by fundamentally different conceptual structures, and subsequently legitimated different concepts of politics and different centres of power. The hybrid institutional structure left by the Allied Occupation of Japan has been able to accommodate and facilitate either of the two visions, creating a political system with no clear centre of legitimacy and no clear centre of power. The relative prominence of the two visions has shifted over time; the bureaucratic vision dominating in the early postwar period, and the constitutional vision coming to the fore during recent events.

Introduction

In 1993 the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was voted out of office after 38 years of governing Japan. This broke the tripartite alliance between the LDP, the bureaucracy and big business, which has characterised much of postwar Japanese politics, and paved the way for electoral reform. Analyses of these events have been largely mechanistic, focusing on how these structural changes affect the functioning of Japanese politics.

This paper seeks to show that these events are in fact indicative of a deeper shift in the nature of Japanese politics. During the occupation of Japan, the Allied powers attempted an ‘induced revolution’ (McNelly 1987, p. 76) transforming the polity into a liberal democratic society. However, the result was to establish two competing institutional power structures — the bureaucracy and the Parliamentary political structure; and two competing visions of the polity — the ‘bureaucratic’ and the ‘constitutional.’ These visions are underpinned by fundamentally different conceptual structures and subsequently legitimate fundamentally different forms of politics and centres of power. Consequently, the competition between them is not simply a competition between political adversaries; it is a competition over the nature of politics itself.