

Mayor Asukata and I

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No.202 (reference number of Akira Tamura's bibliography)

Akira Tamura: *Shicho Asukata-san to Watashi, Chihojichi Tsushin, No.170, Chihojichi Senta*, pp.39-42, January 1984 (original in Japanese)

Akira Tamura: Mayor Asukata and I, Telegram of local governments, No.170, Centre of local autonomy, pp.39-42, January 1984.

Toward the end of 1962, I left my previous job and returned to Tokyo from Osaka. There was no bullet train yet, so I took the night train. Although I had many uncertainties about the future, I decided to become a planner for urban and regional development as my life's work. During the ten years or so that I was away, the city of Tokyo had been greatly expanded and there was no longer any place to live. I had no choice but to live in Yokohama, but at that time I had nothing to do with Yokohama and did not know Mr. Ichio Asukata. The apartment I lived in happened to be in a high-rise building in front of Yamashita Park, and I had a clear view of foreign ships entering the harbor. The town was desolate, but Yokohama, this window to modern civilization, somehow captured my heart.

I was pushed out of Tokyo to live in Yokohama in the middle of Tokyo's great transformation and upheaval. If I had lived in Tokyo, I would not have had such a close relationship with Yokohama. Living in Yokohama due to urban changes had a great impact on my career path.

Around that time, Asukata was elected mayor of Yokohama. The sound of the name was familiar to me, having lived near the historical place of Asuka during my days in Osaka. I also remembered that he addressed the issue of the US spy black jet plane at the Parliament and a newspaper article for his election highest-scoring as a young MP.

Asukata, who became mayor, advocated direct democracy, citizen participation, and a 10,000-person citizens' rally. This was something that blew away the moldy image of city hall. I, too, had a fresh impression of the origin of democracy in local governments and citizens.

The first time I met Asukata was when I was on an inspection tour of Yokohama from the sea on a Port and Harbor Bureau lunch with about 20 other scholars. Rather than the image of a dashing young politician, Asukata had a sturdy, yet folksy appearance that could have been used in a comic strip. I also learned then for the first time that he had a bad leg.

So, even though we had never met before, I complained about the construction of an elevated freight railway line in Yamashita Park, which would ruin the scenery. Asukata had already made up his mind. I was still a young man, but he explained to me enthusiastically that it was unavoidable due to the cost and other factors. Although there were some points I did not agree with, I was left with the impression that he was an honest person with whom I could talk, not an arrogant and unapproachable mayor. He was exactly the right kind of mayor to promote citizen participation.

Later, at the planning office in Tokyo where I was working, I was assigned to develop a town development plan for Yokohama. The city center had been devastated by the war damage and the U.S. military's requisition of the city after the defeat. In the suburbs, uncontrolled housing development by the population pushed out of Tokyo could not be prevented, and Yokohama had become a city with a large population that had lost its identity. Yokohama must become a self-reliant city with its own unique character. However, the city's finances are strained. We must somehow come up with new ways to improve the city. As a citizen of the city, I was more committed to this project than to any other city or region.

At the time, however, I had no idea that I would end up in city hall. I had done a few government jobs in the past, and I thought I was done with government. But it just so happened that I was assigned to

work in "Machisukuri (town making)" in the newly established Planning and Coordination Bureau of the city. My first job was to build Odori Park (linear park) by changing the policy of elevated motorway into undergrounding it that had already been legally approved for urban planning. The central government authorities had a reputation for saying, "Tamura, a newcomer to the city without knowing what was going on up to that point, is bullying the mayor into doing something he can't." Asukata's leadership was really strong. The park planning was started under the strong leadership of Asukata. When I thought about the elevated railroad in Yamashita Park, which I had talked about four or five years earlier, I felt that something had to be done. The Yamashita Park elevated railroad must have been on Asukata's mind as well. He said to the motorway, "This is a scar between eyebrows." We almost ran into a deadlock several times during difficult negotiations, and overcame obstacles to create the Odori Park, which subsequently inspired a series of redevelopment projects, including Kusunoki pedestrian plaza, Bashamichi shopping street renewal, and the Isezaki-cho Promenade.

The most significant achievement of Asukata as mayor was his advocacy and practice of changing the local government into a self-governing entity that stands on the side of the citizens. This was written into the new Constitution and was an important pillar of the postwar democratic reforms. However, the actual environment had not yet changed so much from the prewar situation. Citizens were no longer interested in or aware of their local governments, which operated as subcontractor agencies of the central government. Municipalities were not trusted by citizens and had not yet escaped from the "bureaucratic" atmosphere of their work.

Today, there is not a single municipality in Japan that does not advocate citizen participation. The nature of local governments has also been democratized greatly. Many local governments are now talking about autonomy and independence of their management, and the "era of the local" is being called for. Of course, not everything has gone well, as citizen participation and the transformation of local governments through citizen autonomy are eternal challenges. However, it even feels as if we have come to a different country, considering that citizen participation was advocated and implemented 20 years ago even under strong resistance from old conservatives. It is certain that Asukata has laid out a course for local governments to take the initiative in citizen self-governance, which is the true form of local government. By transforming the bureaucratic local governments that had been subcontracted to the central government into autonomous citizen governments, new issues such as pollution prevention, welfare, and community development that could not be adequately handled by the central government were raised, and new methods were developed. Municipalities have been substantially revived. New human resources were also attracted to local governments.

Many of the various Yokohama methods that emerged from these efforts have been adopted by the national government and have become a model for municipalities throughout Japan. In fact, people from all over Japan still come to Yokohama to learn about town development methods. This was achieved not through political conservatism or reformism, but through proactive thinking on the part of local governments, standing on the side of citizens and free from precedent and formalism. It is impossible to create a good town in the long run if one stands only for the special interests of one's political party.

Asukata has consistently declared himself an official candidate of the Socialist Party in his mayoral elections. As the mayor, however, he was always civic, not partisan. He was flexible in discussing issues that were good for Yokohama as a municipality with all kinds of people, including those who held different political positions, and he was not afraid of strong external forces in the interest of the citizens. This is why I was able to develop and implement a variety of new municipal policies. The "urban development" approach that we developed in Yokohama is highly regarded throughout Japan regardless of party affiliation, and we were able to create appropriate methods for dealing with major urban changes. This is exactly what Asukata meant when he said, "The unity of local governments besiege the central government." Local governments have put their bodies on the line to solve problems that the central government cannot solve, and have demonstrated their comprehensive independent capabilities in response to the trust of citizens, eventually forcing the central government

to recognize them.

However, it is strange that Asukata, who was the mayor of Yokohama City and who so admirably addressed urban issues as a model for the rest of the country, has since he moved lost sight of his vision for the metropolis and his concrete measures to deal with the problem. It should have been obvious during his time in Yokohama that narrow ideology and idealism are not enough to deal with the complexities of a modern city, especially a metropolis. It can only be said that those who have been rooted in the local community and achieved results through local practice have lost sight of both the citizens and the city since he left the community.

Still, it was inexplicable that he left Yokohama and moved his constituency to Tokyo. Yokohama is the region where Mr. Asukata was born and worked, and it is only natural that he would lose some of his good points by abandoning it and going to the center. This is not "The unity of local governments besiege the central government," but rather "the central government dismantling the local governments. What we must not forget is that Tokyo is also one of the regions. The electoral district No.1 of Tokyo is exactly where I was born and raised, so why is Asukata of Yokohama, who has served as a representative and mayor for nearly 30 years, coming there? It is as if the residents of Tokyo's district had been beaten to the punch, which is the exact opposite of what Asukata had said. It was unfortunate.

The characteristic of Asukata's way of working was to think practically and express himself that way. He did not use abstract concepts or ideas, but rather, he tried to present all measures in a way that the public could easily understand. He was not satisfied with complicated theories or bureaucratic ethics, but always tried to establish a connection between citizens and local government by expressing himself in concrete terms. I learned a lot from him, but it was quite surprising to me that after he left the citizen's office and became chairman of the socialist party committee, he became more abstract and conceptual in his expressions. It was the exact opposite. Where has the Asukata I knew gone?

In Yokohama, he always created a free and joyful atmosphere. Democratic leadership is about making the people around you happy and allowing them to express their opinions freely and frankly, without being sycophantic. Every early Monday morning, we held executive meeting of a few of us with the mayor. We always had a round table discussion on a variety of topics before getting into the agenda. It was quite pleasant, with constant laughter. Such an atmosphere ultimately led to a sense of common solidarity among the leaders, even when we faced severe disagreements and difficult obstacles after we got to the important agenda items. We often joked around in the middle of such heated exchanges of opinions. I have been in a variety of workplaces, but there is almost no such atmosphere of free exchange of opinions, regardless of rank, in government offices and companies. The atmosphere was lively and pleasant, like that of a free enterprise group. This was what motivated them to take on even the toughest challenges.

They also respected the opinions of young people and the frontline. Often, he would grab these people in the corner of the meeting table and have them speak directly to him. This motivated them and made the meetings more realistic and productive.

Asukata himself was an idea man. He often said, "I have two hands full of ideas," as if he were scooping up water with both hands. However, we were not afraid to point out the shortcomings of the mayor's ideas, saying on the spot, "That's no good," "That's a problem," and so on, and we would discuss them. We often got into debates with the mayor. Many of those ideas disappeared in the process. Because of this free discussion, everyone was willing to take responsibility for implementing what we decided to do.

Even dissenting opinions were well accepted. That is why we can debate and discuss. Here is what happened. Asukata was always saying, "We should build a professional baseball stadium for the children of Yokohama. The location was to rebuild the old stadium in Yokohama Park in front of City Hall. However, it was not so easy because of many problems. Many people were clearly against the

project, and I was very cautious. However, even in front of citizens and customers, Asukata said with a smile, "I am willing to do it, but Tamura here is against it. Normally, this would be called internal disunity, but the fact that he openly said this to others made the atmosphere more relaxed. It was a virtue of his character. That is why, several years later, when the situation had matured, I did my utmost to address this issue. The result was a wonderful stadium, built in the best possible way: a joint-stock corporation powered by the citizens. If the mayor had given orders coercively when the time was not right, it would not have been a good job. By accepting dissenting opinions, he is ultimately making good use of people.

But Asukata didn't like the word to use people. He always said, "I never used other people, they all worked with me as my friends." This was not just a figure of speech, but a reflection of Asukata's human nature.

Asukata often motivated people by delegating tasks to them. He often told them, "Do it without fear of failure. Although he would say so, some people were not so sure. That would not move the people in the government office. Asukata literally backed up those who were working hard. It is normal for a local government to have opponents and detractors when undertaking new work. If we take a passive attitude, we cannot implement measures for the benefit of the citizens. Real leadership is not about nit-picking, but about protecting the position of motivated officials who find themselves in a difficult situation. When I joined the city, I often clashed with people for the first two or three years. If we are to do our jobs, we have to change the old ways of doing things. There were unavoidable conflicts and confrontations, and there were times when it was my fault. I will never forget the time he saw my troubled face and instead of warning me, he encouraged me by saying, "How are you enjoying your work?"

Asukata said, "I am a professional politician, but you are a professional urban planner, and I will follow your opinion in the end." In fact, he entrusted me with urban development and defended me when it was necessary. That is why I was able to implement a variety of methods that are still used today as a model for comprehensive and creative urban development. In other words, Asukata was in politics and I was in city planning. Since Yokohama had done so well, I thought that professional politics other than Yokohama's city planning was not something I should meddle in. However, this is not the case. Politics is not the monopoly of politicians who call themselves professionals. Professionals stand in a world of fixed ideas, or, when they think they do, they take a surprisingly unprincipled opportunistic approach to electoral considerations. This makes it difficult for amateur citizens to understand and makes politics unreliable for them. In fact, it is necessary for amateurs to look at reality with an honest eye, and they are often able to make more justified judgments.

In fact, it was Asukata himself, when he was mayor, who encouraged the participation of amateur citizens in local government and created a sense of civic awareness. While he himself created this trend, I wonder if he had become a so-called "professional politician. Did he forget about local communities and cities? The seeds of civic autonomy seem to be growing little by little in various parts of the country, transcending the intentions of those who sowed the seeds.