

364 Pride of Municipal Officials as Staff of "Citizen's Government"

The Position of Local Government Officials

At the 20th anniversary conference of the Japan Association of Local Authorities held in Yokohama in 2006, I proposed that local governments are the "governments of citizens" and that they should conduct their activities, research, and practices with this as their goal. "Citizen's" refers to the ownership of things 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, it should be achieved over time. It took nearly 20 years for the word "municipality," which is now commonly used, to take root.

Municipal government employees naturally become staff members of the "citizen's government. They should be aware of this, 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 a central government ministry, and the employees have taken it in stride. Even the most competent staff members would say without hesitation, "I'm going to the main government office. Local governments are not supposed to have their own ministries, and even without waiting for the "Law on Decentralization" of 2000, the Constitution of Japan guarantees that local governments are equal and co-equal with the central government. They are independent of the central government, established by local citizens.

The Pleasure of 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, which is difficult for individual citizens to conceive of. Policies enacted by the central government are implemented because they are necessary and effective for the community, and are not implemented mechanically. They may use their own ingenuity in the detailing of implementation. Also, for region-specific problems, they must be formulated and implemented by themselves.

In developing countries, it was efficient for the central government to formulate uniform policies and raise national standards uniformly. Since the Meiji Restoration, since resources and human resources were scarce, the minimum conditions such as education, railroads, roads, and urban devices were first developed under a centralized system. Today, however, Japan is of course a mature country. Local conditions vary widely and should not be treated uniformly. Rather than building inorganic, characterless boxes based on the standards of the Ministry of Education, it would be better to give schools a unique appearance tailored to the local community. If the school is designed by the students themselves, they will become attached

to it, and it will be able to incorporate the individuality of the community. Enforcing a uniform national standard is also 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, street trees, and street furniture.

If local governments would just automatically follow the laws and standards of the central government and its 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 and will have wisdom and a sense of responsibility. The staff will be motivated and creative, and the workplace will be vibrant and fun.

Duties of Local Government Officials

However, if this is not 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 for 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 chiefs and officials for "citizens' government. However, the chiefs 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 tends to be fixed, and to launch new possibilities. Therefore, the chief executive hires experts in government administration or administrative staff. These are the employees of the municipality. The employees 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 as a whole. Only on this basis can the various conventional expertise and techniques be put to use. Some officials have said, "Laypeople should stay out of it," but it is the laypeople, the citizens and other departments, who are more open and honest in their questioning. The expertise of the citizens is used in a timely manner.

Since citizen government is also an organization, employees are assigned to different fields. Very few are assigned to departments that handle the whole. However, even though they may seem to be in charge of a narrow field, the work of the community is always connected to the whole. Regardless of the field in which they are assigned, they must always consider the lives of citizens and the region as a whole.

In the days of local administration as a subcontractor of the central government, we were only able to do rigid, vertical work, but in a "citizens' 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 people a sense of pride in their work.

Is the Institutional Curve Absolute?

However, looking at the current local governments, some may say that they are not yet "citizen governments," even when it comes to fiscal issues alone. There may also be those who say that just because the Law on Decentralization has been enacted, it is still the same as ever. There is a great need to continue to enhance the institutional autonomy of local governments in terms of administration and finance.

However, it would be a mistake to say that they cannot move without first reforming the system. Even 40 years ago, when there was no discussion of decentralization and the system did not allow for much more autonomy, the City of Yokohama was able to act as a "citizens' government" on several issues and achieve 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, the staff to be willing to take action, and the implementation to show that considerable things are 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. Citizens' government" can be more powerful than a system if it is open enough to citizens and if it has their trust. Instead of bemoaning the current situation, local government officials should first take pride in their role as "citizen government" officials and take some 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. As citizens themselves, the staff must patiently work to find points of harmony from the same vantage point. 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, in order to maintain and improve human life and to make the community unique. It is people power that makes a true "citizen's government". Full-time employees play an important role.

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