Japan debates proposal for a 'super-ministry' of science

Tokyo. An audacious plan has been put to the Japanese government for re-grouping all the science-related sections of its ministries and agencies into a single ministry of education, science and culture, a move that would have profound consequences for the administration of government-funded science.

The plan is one of a series of proposals for government reform put to the new administration of prime minister Morihiro Hosokawa. In particular, it is being suggested that the number of ministries and agencies be reduced from over 20 to six.

At first glance, the proposals seem too radical to be taken seriously. But they come from the powerful *ad hoc* committee on administrative reform, the body which in the early 1980s recommended the privatization of the national railways, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (NTT) and Japan Tobacco.

The latter goals were each realized, thanks in large part to the strong leadership of the then prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone. In the same way, the fate of this latest proposal, which will be fiercely resisted by the ministries themselves, depends very much on Hosokawa and his coalition administration.

The committee that has made the proposal is chaired by Eiji Suzuki, a senior adviser to Mitsubishi Kasei chemical company, and has two subcommittees made up of academics, industrialists and journalists. These discussed the possible reform of the central government for three years before presenting their recommendations to Hosokawa at the end of last month.

At present, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Monbusho in Japanese) and the Science and Technology Agency (STA) are the three key players in Japan's government science. However, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications and several other small agencies also make significant contributions to government research.

The committee's overall goal is to increase the efficiency of central government by eliminating unnecessary duplication of effort and breaking down the bureaucratic walls that separate ministries and agencies with similar or overlapping interests.

Thus their report calls for the amalgama-

tion of the present 22 ministries and agencies into six ministries, covering areas such as "lifestyle" (including health, pensions, housing and the environment), "industry", and "national land" (including roads, transport, and communications).

One such body would be a giant ministry of education, science and culture (not to be confused with the present Monbusho). Many government officials are horrified by such a suggestion. Officials of the STA, in particular, are opposed to the idea of working in a ministry where they might be assigned to work on education in primary and high schools, rather than science and technology. (Monbusho's preoccupation with schools is one of the great weaknesses of the university research system that the ministry oversees).

But MITI officials are more receptive to the calls for change. Reform-minded government officials in MITI have for several years been calling for more coordinated interaction between Monbusho, MITI and STA in developing and carrying out science and technology policy. They think the debate opened up by the Suzuki committee will be very healthy, although they do not expect the recommendations to be implemented as proposed.

Much depends on the future of the Hosokawa administration. At present, Hosokawa is preoccupied with pushing through the reform of Japan's election system on which he has staked his future as prime minister. If he succeeds, the next target will be to loosen governmental controls on nearly all aspects of Japanese life.

Behind these moves is a fierce power-struggle between the bureaucracy and the Hosokawa administration. Members of the new administration, in particular Ichiro Ozawa, a former LDP politician, want to reduce the power of government officials. Ozawa, who co-chairs Shinseitō, one of the most powerful parties in the eight-party coalition, is proposing that senior officials should no longer participate in Diet committees, and that politicians should instead be appointed in the ministries and agencies to perform this role.

Such moves, however, are being strongly resisted by government officials, who argue that politicians must first clean up the corruption in their ranks before playing a stronger role in the administration of policy.

David Swinbanks

Opposition fails to dent commitment to plutonium

Tokyo. Japan seems determined to defy international opinion by pursuing plans to use large vast amounts of plutonium in its nuclear power industry, both despite and because of delays in the country's development of fast breeder reactors.

The latest annual report of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), released last week, reaffirms Japan's commitment to a policy that will result in Japan increasing its supplies of plutonium from a few tonnes at present to 85 tonnes by 2010. This will be done through both local production and re-imports of reprocessed nuclear fuel.

The United States has long abandoned most of its fast breeder reactor programme, and, under a new nonproliferation policy announced in September (and reinforced in a statement to Congress last week), President Bill Clinton has declared that he does not support the civilian use of plutonium.

Britain and Germany have frozen their fast reactor programmes. And France's Superphénix reactor has been plagued with problems. But the AEC report insists that Japan must pursue the production of plutonium through nuclear fuel recycling, and promote the use of the fuel in conventional and fast breeder reactors.

Japan faced severe international criticism in January when it brought back a tonne of plutonium from a reprocessing facility in France by sea.

Despite the furore, Japan is now planning to ship about another 54 tonnes of plutonium derived from reprocessed Japanese nuclear fuel from Britain and France over the next two decades. And a further 30 tons will be produced by a reprocessing facility under construction in Rokkasho village in northern Japan.

The first few tonnes will be used in the prototype fast breeder reactor Monju, which is expected to reach criticality in April next year. But the supply of plutonium will quickly exceed the needs of Monju. Instead, plutonium will be mixed with uranium fuel for use in ordinary light water reactors.

Given the current low price and ample supplies of conventional uranium fuel, it is uneconomical to use mixed uranium-plutonium fuel, but the decision is being forced on Japan's nuclear power industry because of delays in the development of commercial fast breeder reactors — economic doubts have pushed back the start-up of a commercial reactor until at least 2020.

Meanwhile the plutonium has had to be put to some use to allay concern that Japan is stockpiling it for production of nuclear weapons; hence the decision to burn up plutonium in ordinary light water reactors.

David Swinbanks

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REASONS

Will Hosokawa force reforms?