

National Security and Politics

Bill Golike

I spent one month working in the office of Diet Member Hideki Makihara. He is a member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from Saitama Prefecture, which is just north of Tokyo. Representative Makihara was elected to the Lower House of the Diet as one of “Koizumi’s Children,” who came into office under the wing of former Prime Minister Koizumi when he dissolved the House of Representatives and called for a snap election in 2005. I wanted to work for Makihara because of his interest in trade issues and his desire to help Japan through internationalization. He is a lawyer by training who had previously worked in one of the major Washington, D.C., firms on international trade and WTO issues.

However, the month I was there, November, is budget season for the Japanese government, which overwhelmed most other business. This means there is a constant flow of visitors to Representative Makihara’s office. I attended his meetings with various private sector groups and government ministries who wanted to discuss tax reform, the anti-monopoly law, proposals on regional development, securities’ tax policy, environmental tax policy, corporate tax policy, SME (Small and Medium Enterprise) development policy, and investing in start-ups, to name a few. Former colleagues of mine from my previous Mansfield placement in the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy (METI) even showed up one day. If Representative Makihara was not able to meet with them, then the visitors would drop off written proposals outlining their particular interest. This went on all day long, so his schedule and mail box were always full.

One day I attended a Budget Committee meeting at LDP headquarters. It was a media frenzy. There were at least one hundred reporters attending, but they are only allowed in for the first thirty minutes before being escorted out. The reporters were hanging out in the hallway, some with their ears pressed to the committee room door, waiting for the meeting to conclude. When the top LDP officials walked out of the room, it becomes a media scrum as the reporters tried to gather clues as to how the government would spend money.

One of the most interesting experiences I had as a Mansfield Fellow was the morning I spent with Representative Makihara in his district in Saitama. Representative

Makihara started every day by standing in front of one of the train stations in his district for one or two hours. He greeted everyone as they went by, and would often shout out various policy proposals. So one day I joined him. I stood on the opposite side of the subway entrance, held one of his banners and said “*ohayo gozaimasu*” (“good morning” in Japanese) to everyone who walked past. Needless to say I got some strange looks. But some people would stop and chat to find out what I was doing. The schools kids in their uniforms would just giggle and say hello as they walked by.

Afterwards, we met two community elders for coffee to discuss what was happening in that area. After coffee, the group of us walked around the neighborhood for two and a half hours. They would knock on doors, talk to people passing by, hand out name cards, and put up posters in strategic locations, including across the street from Representative Makihara’s opponent’s headquarters. Like in the United States, Diet members seem to be in a permanent state of campaigning. He told me that the people in his district usually don’t have a local party affiliation because they are transplants from other areas of Japan who came to live in Saitama as a bedroom community for Tokyo. So the most important thing for Representative Makihara is to have name recognition. This is why he has to spend so much time in his district pressing the flesh. While we were walking around that morning, several people said, “Oh, I’ve seen your poster.”

There were two issues that kept coming up over and over in this area. The local residents were very concerned about the height of an apartment building that was under construction because it would cast a shadow over many of the surrounding homes. The other issue of concern was over a couple of burglaries that had taken place recently. Later on I heard that the apartment building ended up being a couple of stories lower than originally planned and the people who still ended up in the shadow were compensated. I don’t know if the burglar was ever caught.

It was interesting to see the difference between the issues raised at the Diet office and those in the district. In the office people were seeking Representative Makihara’s support and influence on large scale policy issues, potentially impacting millions of dollars and millions of lives, while the people back home in his district who actually voted cared about getting enough sunlight to grow their house plants. This really solidified for me the idea that all politics is local. That morning after our walk around, Representative Makihara and I went back downtown to the office because he had to be on the Diet floor for business. Afterwards, he went back out to his district and continued his meet and greet with constituents for another three hours.

William Golike participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the U.S. Department of Commerce from 2006–2008. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served in full-time placements in Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), Nippon Keidanren, and Matsushita Electrical Industrial Co., Ltd. (Panasonic). He also completed a placement in the office of the Honorable Hideki Makihara, LDP Member, House of Representatives. He currently is Deputy Director of the Office of the Pacific Basin, International Trade Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.