Profile
Keizo Takemi: a catalytic charisma

Keizo Takemi is unique, even if he says so himself. A Senior Fellow at the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE), a former Member of the House of Councillors of Japan’s National Diet—where he also served as Senior Vice Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare—and, to cap it all, he has even had a stint as a TV anchor on CNN in Japan. But for all that, the first thing he wanted to talk about when he made his way, severely jet-lagged, into his office was rugby.

Sturdily built, Takemi wastes no time in letting it be known that he “was a really good rugby player, and grew up with the rugby game”. He smiles broadly as he recounts his exploits as a scrum half at high school in Tokyo (where he was born in 1951), and then later as a flanker at Keio University, all told with a breeziness and charm that immediately puts everyone at ease. Even after the long flight from Japan, Takemi still oozes the charisma that kept his viewers viewing and his voters (for two terms, at least) voting. But it takes more than charisma to achieve what Takemi has done.

Despite being the son of the famous physician and scientist Taro Takemi, who was head of the Japanese Medical Association for 25 years, Keizo was always more interested in international politics than following in his father’s footsteps. In any case, he chuckles, “I was really too good a rugby player, and grew up with the rugby game”. With an undergraduate degree in international politics under his belt, Takemi decided to stay at Keio University and study for a graduate degree in international relations with a particular interest in divided countries. “Japan is surrounded by divided countries, and those are the negative legacy of the Cold War in Asia”, he says, suddenly serious. “We always have suffered from those very serious causes of tension and instability.”

After spending a year mastering Mandarin in Taiwan, Takemi committed to an academic career and accepted a position at Tokai University. But then his career took an unexpected twist when he was spotted by the Japanese television broadcaster TV Asahi and asked to anchor the Day Watch international news digest programme for CNN in Japan. “I learned a lot”, he recalls of his time mixing academic life with the buzz of a television studio. “CNN always gives so many different types of news of the outside world, and it gave me a wider sensitivity of what happened outside of our country.”

Being an anchorman may have exposed Takemi to the world, but it also exposed the world to Takemi, and the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) liked what they saw. “The LDP requested me to run for the Upper House election as a representative of the LDP party. And then”, Takemi says nonchalantly, “I became a parliamentarian”. In his two terms (12 years) after his election in 1995, Takemi held a number of legislative posts, including State Secretary for Foreign Affairs and, later, Senior Vice Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare in the Shinzo Abe Cabinet. His foreign policy expertise made Takemi a natural when it came to foreign affairs, and one of his major achievements in office was the complete overhaul of Japan’s once fragmented system of allocating overseas development aid. A keen intellect, patience, and persistence enabled Takemi to draw previously disparate aid bodies together under the umbrella of a revitalised Japan International Cooperation Agency, and ensure that aid policy was not only coherent and consistent, but took Amartya Sen’s concept of human security as a core principle.

Takemi’s political power was based largely on votes from health professionals—a legacy of his father’s leadership. This inevitably led to Takemi also taking a close interest in health and welfare, particularly health-system reforms and later the introduction of the elderly care insurance system in 2000. Negotiating these reforms was, Takemi says, “really a kind of a jungle”. In reconciling the various vested interests, Takemi says he learned how to be patient. “Without a low profile and patient posture, nobody can be a good catalyst in Japanese politics.”

Politicians, however, are always hostage to fortune, and in 2007 a hugely unpopular LDP party suffered a drubbing at the ballot box. Takemi found himself out of a job. But, as Michael Reich, Taro Takemi Professor of International Health Policy at Harvard University, explains, Keizo’s electoral misfortune would turn out to be a blessing in disguise: “Ironically, losing the Upper House election in Japan in 2007 became the catalyst for a new political life, as a global health leader for Japan and the world.”

Combining his expertise in health and foreign affairs, Takemi reinvented himself as a global health diplomat, and had an almost instant impact. While working as Research Fellow at Harvard School of Public Health between 2007 and 2009, Reich says, “Keizo’s work in preparing Japan’s proposal on global health for the 2008 Tokyo G8 Summit has had a lasting impact on global health policy—pushing it in the direction of health-system strengthening—and on Japanese policy”.

Most recently, Takemi has lent both his expertise and skills in diplomacy to The Lancet’s Japan Series, celebrating 50 years of universal health coverage. “I loved it”, he says grinning. But, he adds, referring obliquely to the “very pure sentiments” of academics, “I didn’t realise that this is much more difficult than a politician’s job”.

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