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Prince Saionji and the Taishō Political Crisis, 1912-1913

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The intense interest of students of modern Japan in the Meiji Period (1868–1912) and in the decade of the 1930's has tended to relegate the events of the Taishō Period to obscurity. One of the most important of these lesser known events is the Taishō Political Crisis (known in Japan as the *Taishō Seihen)* of 1912-13. In this crisis many of the tensions of the Meiji political structure were intensified and in its resolution a new equilibrium of political forces was created. An examination of the crisis can, therefore, throw light on the preceding period and give added insight into later events.

The crisis was precipitated by the demand of the Japanese army for two new divisions to be created in the next fiscal year. When the cabinet rejected this demand the army used its constitutional right of direct access to the throne and its administrative prerogative (a prerogative acquired in 1899 through the action of General Yamagata) to withdraw the war minister and to refuse to provide a replacement. These moves forced the resignation of the second Saionji cabinet in December, 1912.

Popular indignation, spurred on in Tokyo by the press and the parties, burst forth in the next two months, engulfing the Diet and the third Katsura cabinet in bitter struggle and forcing Katsura to resign. Only with the appointment of Admiral Yamamoto Gombei as prime minister and the installation of his cabinet in February, 1913 did these public disturbances and the political protest subside. Prince Saionji was one of the protagonists in this struggle. Study of his attitude and role reveals much about the nature of Japanese political processes and about the use and

transfer of power in Japan at this time. This paper is an attempt to analyze this important series of events and to trace Saionji's role in them.

The Taishō Political Crisis was an important landmark in the development of modern Japanese political institutions and practices. It was the climax of a struggle among the power groups which had emerged in the two decades after the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution. These included the *Genrō*, the military, and the political parties. The *Genrō* or Elder Statesmen formed the inner core of the group of powerful men known as the Meiji oligarchy. Yamagata Aritomo the leader of the military, was himself a member of the Genrō while his protégé, Katsura Tarō, though not a member of the Genrō, was a member of the oligarchy. The political parties were organizations which lacked experience and cohesive programs but were eager to gain a share of power. The parties were headed by members of the oligarchy and other top leaders were men from the bureaucracy rather than politicians.

During the last decade of the Meiji Period political leadership in the government alternated between Katsura and Saionji Kimmochi, men with cordial and close personal ties, who differed profoundly in political outlook and practical approach to national affairs. Katsura, though not a narrow militarist, was a willing spokesman for the wishes and policies of the military. In addition he had great political ambition. His actions brought him into conflict with the Diet, the press, the populace of Tokyo, and finally with Yamagata himself.

Saionji was a *kuge* and a member of the oligarchy. He was deeply devoted to the throne and was, in many ways, conservative in outlook. As a result of his study abroad in the 1870's, however, he was committed to the development of an open society within Japan and to an internationalist approach in foreign affairs. Saionji had succeeded Itō Hirobumi as President of the *Seiyūkai* in 1903 and, with his chief lieutenant, Hara Kei, had worked hard to build the party and to enhance the prestige of constitutional and parliamentary processes. His success in this endeavor was one of the prime factors which precipitated the Taishō crisis of December, 1912–March, 1913. A brief review of the establish-

ment of his second cabinet will give some indication of this success.

THE SECOND SAIONJI CABINET

The diary of Hara Kei provides a clear picture of how this cabinet was formed. The most important fact is that neither Yamagata and the other Genrō, nor Katsura, were substantially consulted in its formation. This was a major break with precedent and a victory for Saionji in the struggle to put the exchange of political power on a constitutional basis.

Hara commented as follows:

> When the first Saionji cabinet was set up, Katsura was consulted on personnel; this time, if I have anything to do with it, with the exception of the posts of army and navy minister, we shall not entertain any special requests from Katsura. In so far as possible we will not consult him. Since it is better to let him know after the lineup of ministers is actually settled, we decided that it would be best for Saionji, when he visits Katsura tomorrow, to discuss the situation in general terms. Saionji will indicate that we are in the midst of deliberations on the cabinet's makeup.[1]

Aside from this one preliminary meeting between Saionji and Katsura, the planning and negotiating for the cabinet list was carried out by Saionji, Hara, and Matsuda. This is reflected in the make-up of the cabinet which emerged. Four of the ten ministers were members of the *Seiyūkai;* of the total membership only one, Makino Nobuaki, was a *Sat-Chō* man and he could not be classified as an oligarch. Rather he was an intimate and, to some extent, a protégé of Saionji. Haseba Sumitaka came from Kagoshima, but was selected as education minister because he was a strong party man, not because of any connection with Satsuma or the oligarchs. Geographic representation was also clearly a factor. By any standard of comparison this cabinet represented growth in the direction of more liberal, constitutional government.

In the autumn of 1912 the cabinet undertook the compilation of the budget for the next fiscal year and a familiar problem appeared. At a cabinet meeting on November 28 Uehara, the army minister, demanded funds for two new army divisions.

Saionji informed him that these were provided for in the long-range fiscal planning and that the immediate problem of retrenchment must be considered first. Uehara threatened to resign and the meeting was recessed to allow time for informal negotiations.

Uehara's threat precipitated three months of tense struggle among the various political forces of the country. The problem had been smoldering for some time, for on November 22 Saionji had written to Hara telling him of the possibility of trouble:

> Greetings:
>
> Yesterday morning, on the basis of our discussions of the previous evening, I informed the Army Minister that they would be expected to present an explanation to the cabinet meeting that day. They have rejected the idea that my approval must be obtained [for expansion], saying that they cannot accept this as the basis for action. Although I questioned them in detail and urged [acceptance] I suspect that they will not agree. Anyway, we parted with the understanding that they would think about it until this morning. Since today's cabinet meeting may get out of hand as a result of this situation, I wanted to let you know about it.
>
> Yesterday I talked with Justice Minister Matsuda; I shall tell you the details of this conversation later. I wanted to tell you about it last night, but since I was feeling so bad, I delayed.
>
> This note covers only the pressing matters.
>
> Hastily,
> Kimmochi
>
> November 22
> His Excellency, Hara
> Minister of the Interior[2]

In reality there were two questions to be resolved. The first, and immediate one, involved the demands of the army for expansion. No one objected in principle to this. Saionji himself was willing to promise the two divisions but had refused to do so for the next fiscal year. Since the cabinet had decided on a policy of retrenchment and fiscal reform, he felt that this must be carried out first, without reference to the question of expansion. (The army wanted to use the money it would save in reorganization to establish the two new divisions; Saionji insisted that this would

vitiate his retrenchment program.) The impasse on this immediate question led directly to the more fundamental issue raised by Uehara's threat to resign. This was the question of military control over a cabinet. By threatening to withdraw its minister the army could force its views on the majority since the army minister had to be a man on the active list. It was this power which created a serious crisis.

Saionji realized how crucial the matter could be, and he and Hara rallied their forces to deal with it. Unfortunately, the military held the trump cards because of the rule established by Yamagata in 1899 that the service ministers must be general officers on the active list. This small group of men, by refusing to cooperate, could topple a cabinet.

The period from November 28 to December 6 was one of feverish political maneuvering. After Uehara's threat to resign on the twenty-eighth, there followed two days of informal negotiations. Then, on December 1, Saionji talked privately with Uehara and thought that he had reached agreement on a way for Uehara to resign and save face, at the same time allowing the cabinet to obtain a successor to him. However, in spite of this agreement Uehara took the matter directly to the throne. Hara's report on the incident is revealing:

> This morning I received a sudden call for a cabinet meeting and went to the prime minister's official residence at eleven A.M. From what Saionji said it seems that Army Minister Uehara went directly to the Emperor this morning [December 2] and submitted his resignation. Moreover he gave his specific reason for resigning.[3] Yesterday he had said he would resign on the basis of ill health, not giving the real reason. Saionji had requested the cabinet secretary to accept his resignation, and I, fearing that Saionji might be careless in handling the resignation, had also ordered it to be accepted after I went to my office. Thus Uehara should have sent his resignation to Saionji once it was accepted, but instead he broke his agreement of yesterday. Saionji has heard that Uehara is running about contacting Ōyama and Yamagata, so he thinks perhaps it is for them that he is stirring up this trouble.[4]

Uehara's action forced Saionji's hand. The prime minister called a cabinet meeting the morning of December 2 and reported

on how matters stood. There followed discussion of what the next move should be. Various lines of action were explored and plans laid for the resignation of the cabinet if other moves failed. Hara's report again is revealing:

> Katsura as Grand Chamberlain went to the Prime Minister's residence and met Saionji. After he had informed Saionji in his official capacity as an imperial messenger that Uehara had submitted his resignation, Katsura, speaking as an individual, asked why Saionji did not accept Uehara's position. Saionji replied that he could not, under any circumstances, agree to this. Then they discussed the question of a successor to Uehara; Katsura indicated he did not want to ask for a successor. Saionji told him in confidence that the whole cabinet might resign. Saionji then asked Katsura if he would accept the post if Terauchi would not; Katsura replied that if Terauchi refused, he would too. However, Saionji thought that Katsura himself did not feel too strongly and might be willing to take the post.
>
> When we had heard this report from Saionji, the cabinet agreed, after some discussion, that tomorrow Saionji would go to the palace, report the situation to the Emperor, indicating acceptance of Uehara's resignation, and at the same time seek a replacement for Uehara. If a successor could not be obtained, Saionji would add to his report the fact that the cabinet would have to resign en bloc. After that Saionji would visit Yamagata, explain the situation, and discuss the question of a successor with him. It was decided that, depending on Yamagata's answer to this question, the cabinet might immediately resign without formally requesting a successor for Uehara. First Cabinet Secretary Minami was ordered to prepare a draft of a statement of reasons for the resignation of the cabinet which would, in one sense, be a refutation of Uehara's statement.[5]

The next day Saionji called on Yamagata for help, but was rebuffed. The cabinet submitted its resignation on December 4, but there followed more than two weeks of discussions and maneuvering before this action was officially accepted. Saionji, on the sixth, reported to Hara by letter on his attempt to get Yamagata to intervene:

> Greetings:
>
> After we parted the other day I visited General Yamagata. This was in one sense an official visit, and in another a private

one; we talked about the meeting of the Genrō, which had taken place that day, as well as about my request to him to reconsider the situation. However, the army is unwilling to budge one step. In other words, they say their plan must be presented to the Diet this year. They are maintaining the same position which Uehara took the other day. As a result [Yamagata says] there is no room for further consideration of the matter. If his answer is this, then we have reached the point at which there will be a complete break. I send you this information in confidence. Of course when we meet I will give you the full details, but in the meantime I write this hasty note.

Yours,
Kimmochi

December 6
His Excellency Hara
Minister of the Interior
P.S. I have some ideas about a successor; but I will leave that until we meet.[6]

Hara recorded in his diary receipt of this letter and other developments that day, including a second meeting between Saionji and Yamagata:

In the afternoon I received a letter from Saionji. He had visited Yamagata to ask if he would reconsider [his decision not to help], but Yamagata still desired to have the expansion program put into effect from next year, just as advocated by the military. He refused to help, saying that there was no room for reconsideration of the matter. . . .

The Genrō were called to the palace at ten A.M. and met until five P.M. During the course of the meeting Yamagata left and went to see Saionji with the word that it is impossible to do anything. I suppose he told Saionji there was no way for him to continue [in office].[7]

It is evident from these accounts that Saionji did everything he could to retrieve the situation, but to no avail. An impasse had been reached in which neither the oligarchs nor the parties and the Diet had sufficient power to win a conclusive victory, and neither would yield. This was a new situation for the oligarchy; never had its power been so seriously challenged. Saionji, with one foot in each camp, was caught in a dilemma of serious proportions.

POLITICAL MANEUVERING

The Genrō met repeatedly for a week (December 8–15) before finally settling on Katsura as the new prime minister. Saionji had tried to force Yamagata to form the next cabinet; when unsuccessful in this, Saionji had recommended Katsura. In the meantime the country was in an uproar; popular indignation at the arbitrary attitude of the army was strong. Feelings ran so high that Yamagata confided to Hara he feared an assassination plot against himself.

The emergence of the third Katsura cabinet did nothing to quell popular indignation, and the unrest in the *Seiyūkai* became more and more unmanageable. Plans were drawn for a joint effort by the *Seiyūkai* and the *Kokumintō* to unseat Katsura, and a no-confidence motion was made ready for submission to the Diet. Hara and Matsuda participated in these negotiations, consulting with Saionji and obtaining his approval. Toward the end of January, 1913, Saionji left Tokyo for a few days, giving Hara and Matsuda the responsibility of running the party and keeping him informed on events. A movement for the defense of the Constitution had been organized early in January by a group of men from the various parties; as it gained momentum, Katsura's position became less and less tenable. He resorted to prorogation of the Diet to forestall the presentation of the no-confidence motion and to give him time to negotiate. Through Katō Kōmei he appealed to Saionji and Hara for help.

Finally, on February 2, Katsura met Saionji and discussed the situation. Katsura asked for help from Saionji and the *Seiyūkai*, but Saionji refused to promise anything, saying he would consult with Hara and Matsuda and then decide on the *Seiyūkai's* stand. Katsura then played his trump card. He secured an imperial message to Saionji suggesting that he obtain the withdrawal of the no-confidence motion in the Diet. This move threw Saionji, Hara, and Matsuda into confusion; they were willing to comply with an imperial command, but the situation was no longer in their hands; there was doubt whether they could force compliance from the party. Saionji made a speech to the party while Hara and Matsuda attempted to muster support among the rank

and file for the withdrawal of the motion. When it was obvious that his move had failed, and that the no-confidence motion would be presented to the Diet, Katsura, rather than face the Diet under these circumstances, resigned, creating another cabinet crisis.

When the Genrō met to consider whom to choose as a successor to Katsura, Yamagata urged Saionji to form another cabinet; Saionji declined, pleading poor health. Saionji then recommended Admiral Yamamoto, a Satsuma man who would not be averse to working with the parties. The oligarchs finally reached agreement on Yamamoto as a compromise candidate, and, when Saionji talked with him, he accepted.

The two months which intervened between the resignation of the second Saionji cabinet and the emergence of the first cabinet of Admiral Yamamoto Gombei (December 21, 1912–February 20, 1913) were months of unmitigated political debate and turmoil. The Diet, the parties, the press, and the people of Tokyo took a more active interest and played a larger role than ever before.

SAIONJI'S ROLE IN THE CRISIS

At the time of his cabinet's resignation in December, 1912, Saionji was frank and straightforward, placing the blame squarely on the military for the disruption of orderly parliamentary government. He made a speech to the *Seiyūkai* to inform members about these developments:

> The army insisted on keeping the money which would have been saved by retrenchment in operation of the department; with it they planned to set up two new divisions. The army insisted that the problem of retrenchment should not be treated as a separate matter. Yet, as I have previously noted, retrenchment was something to be carried out on the basis of a policy whose implementation had been previously agreed upon. The adding of army divisions was a matter which had not been settled by cabinet decision, and, therefore, could not be combined with the other question of retrenchment. It is obvious, not only in the light of the current financial situation, but in view of international conditions as well, that we cannot undertake such expansion in the next fiscal year. Moreover, we cannot accept the view that there is a need for

sudden expansion. Although we sought acceptance of the idea that the retrenchment problem should be considered separately, the army minister refused to yield and finally submitted his resignation to the throne. Under these circumstances it turned out that we could not obtain a successor to him and, therefore, the cabinet submitted its resignation on December 5. Finally, on the twenty-first, this resignation was accepted.[8]

Saionji's remarks to Koizumi Sakutarō, years later, further illuminate his attitude and action in these inner cabinet maneuverings:

> At the time I formed my second cabinet I went to talk with Yamagata about the problem of adding two army divisions. Since he had already agreed to the army plan it was not possible to change their policy.
>
> It was not that I was opposed to adding the divisions; it was a matter of postponing it until after the fiscal reforms had been consummated. Yamagata was not in disagreement with me, but the military was determined and even Yamagata, with all his power, could not alter the situation. Yamagata said that, had the Meiji Emperor been living, he could in some way have used an imperial message to settle the issue, but under the circumstances there was no way to arrange it. This was an excuse, for if Yamagata had really desired to settle the matter—well, the Yamagata of those days was still pretty keen. Be that as it may, Katsura's attitude was obscure; but to put it in a word it was a matter of tactics in the struggle for political power. On the other hand, it is not that, if I had tried to force acceptance of my position, I could not, perhaps, have succeeded. However, my way of thinking and my usual attitude was that whatever I did, it was best to leave space [for maneuvering] and so I did not push things to the limit. However, neither Yamagata, nor Katsura foolishly fought me as a direct enemy. In particular, they did not clumsily topple my cabinet over the army issue.[9]

From these two statements it is clear that Saionji, in spite of his lame excuse for Yamagata and Katsura, felt that Yamagata's support of the army was responsible for his cabinet's fall, and that Katsura tried to use the situation to further his own fortunes. This view is consistent with independent analyses and reports of what happened.

Two further points need to be made. First, although Saionji

did criticize the action of the military and attributed to them his cabinet's downfall, he did not appear to face squarely the basic principle involved. Uehara's action in ignoring his agreement with Saionji and going directly to the Emperor violated principles of parliamentary government and challenged the goals for which Saionji was working. This was the critical question in the cabinet crisis.

Secondly, Saionji had said, "My usual attitude and approach was that, whatever I did, it was best to leave space [for maneuvering] and so I did not push things to the limit."

In answer to criticism it can be said that he felt it was not possible to challenge the military any more directly than he had done. If he had dramatically sacrificed himself at this point to save his cabinet he would have cut himself off from future service by severing his ties with the oligarchy. I am inclined to accept this explanation of his action. Saionji was not then prepared to resolve the ambiguity of his position.

The next act in this drama began with the formation of the third Katsura cabinet. Katsura had not expected to meet determined and united opposition; his confusion emboldened the opposition. Hara and Matsuda were closely involved in the movement to defend the Constitution and, while Saionji remained formally apart from it, Saionji, too, was consulted and he privately approved of the plans. On January 16 Hara recorded a discussion which makes this clear:

> Since Saionji had returned to Tokyo, Matsuda and I went to see him. The outcome of our discussion on Diet policy was, that by means of a proposal which I would make, we would have the general party conference go no farther than simply to adopt a general policy statement which would make clear that we give great respect to the Constitution which the late Emperor established; the statement would give party members freedom of action and would not commit them to anything. We decided that in the Diet we would first put forth an interpellary question and, after receiving an answer, present the no-confidence vote.[10]

In view of later developments, the provision to give party members freedom of action is significant. It is possible that Saionji foresaw that he would be forced to attempt a withdrawal

of the no-confidence motion; by this provision he hoped to give party members a way out.

In an entry two days later, Hara recorded further progress in the planning for Diet action:

> Matsuda, Motoda, and Ozaki came to see me to discuss policy for action in the Diet. We decided to present a question to the government on the twenty-first, exactly as Matsuda and I had agreed the other day. Motoda wrote the question down just as I had discussed the points with Saionji recently.[11]

It is clear that Saionji was closely involved with the behind-the-scenes parliamentary maneuvers being planned.

The imperial suggestion to Saionji to secure the withdrawal from the Diet of the no-confidence motion brought the whole situation to a head; Saionji was placed in an awkward position. The method which he used to extricate himself was singularly his own and, while he was criticized for his actions, they were effective in preserving his position in the oligarchy. Saionji was called to the Aoyama Palace on February 9 and received the imperial message. On his return, a hasty meeting of party leaders was convened at the *Seiyūkai* headquarters to discuss the matter. Hara, in his diary, recorded Saionji's feelings. "Saionji stated positively that, as for his personal position, he had no choice but to obey the Imperial request."[12]

Hara and Matsuda agreed with Saionji and felt that they should try to have the motion withdrawn. Accordingly a general party meeting was called for the next day and Saionji gave a speech in which he recounted the details of his interview as follows:

> Friends, yesterday I received a request from the Emperor, a request which, by its nature, is of very great importance and, at the same time presents difficulties both for our party and for the future of the country. As your president I am deeply troubled by it and therefore I want to explain it to you directly.
>
> It happened yesterday afternoon about 1:30. I received a phone call from Grand Chamberlain Takatsukasa informing me that there was an imperial message for me and I should, therefore, go immediately to the palace. I went and received the message;[13] these were the words: "The discussions now

taking place in the House of Representatives seem rather disorderly. We are still in the period of mourning [for the Meiji Emperor] and I am deeply disturbed by this situation. At the time of your resignation [as prime minister] recently I spoke of this to you. As one of the veteran leaders today I hope you will give the matter thought and fulfill your responsibility as a trusted advisor." I did not receive any written imperial message and, since it was by word of mouth, it occurred to me that, should I hear mistakenly, it would be very serious. Though I was troubled I did not go so far as to write down the message. Accordingly, I questioned Prince Fushimi who was present in the office of the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, explaining that since a mistake would be serious, I would appreciate it if he could confirm whether I had heard correctly. He assured me that the message was as I had heard it. I asked whether the mention of discussions in the Lower House was actually a reference to the no-confidence motion. He replied that it was, and that the meaning of the message was that I should secure harmony in the situation in some way. With that I withdrew, saying I would consult with the members of the party and do something in compliance with the imperial command.

Accordingly, last evening I discussed the matter with Matsuda, Hara, and others in the party executive and this morning in the conference committee we considered it again. As the Emperor's loyal subject I must act in accordance with his message. You are representatives of the people and therefore it is natural that you should reflect their wishes as fully as possible. However, it is my hope that, in view of the present situation, you will not be carried away by the emotions of the moment; that you will give deep and serious thought to the welfare of the party and of the country. I believe that even if you modify your stand this time, that if you, as party members, are strong in your convictions, then, in the future, there will without question come the day when you will achieve your aim. Therefore, again I entreat you earnestly to give the matter sincere and thoughtful consideration.[14]

From the tone and wording of this speech it is obvious that Saionji was under great emotional pressure. In a real sense this action epitomizes the nature of his convictions and the tension which their ambiguity created. His various relationships engendered in him feelings of loyalty to the throne, as an institution, and to the Meiji Emperor, who had so recently died, as a person.

On the other hand, he was convinced that Japan must adopt parliamentary institutions if she were to become a strong and accepted member of the society of nations. The events of late 1912 and early 1913 in which his own government had been forced out, constituted a direct challenge to his political convictions; the will of a small group of military-minded men was being forced upon the country, in opposition to the expressed will of the elected representatives of the people. There appeared no way to resolve the dilemma which confronted him; in fact, he did not resolve it. He avoided the issue and dealt with its separate parts.

Saionji's speech reflects his decision to avoid the implications of his ambivalent commitments. It illustrates the nature of his decision many years before, when forced to leave the *Tōyō Jiyū Shimbun* to work for the development of a parliamentary system *within* the oligarchy rather than cut himself off from the source of power by precipitating an open break.

The imperial message left Saionji no choice if he expected to remain within the existing power structure; he obeyed instructions and, by implication, urged the party to follow his lead. However, nowhere in the speech did he command or demand that it withdraw the no-confidence motion against the Katsura government. In fact, reading between the lines, he appears to have said, "I have been forced to disavow this action and ordered to get you to do the same. However, I am the Emperor's minister, while you are the representatives of the people. You must decide what your action is to be." He urged the party members not to be carried away with emotion and to think the matter through carefully, but he also stressed the fact that it was natural (and therefore right) that they should reflect the people's wishes.

Inukai Tsuyoshi expressed this idea well when he said, as representative of the *Kokumintō* (The other major party) at a conference with Saionji, Hara and Matsuda, "Saionji is Saionji. The *Seiyūkai* is the *Seiyūkai*. Saionji, out of respect for the imperial message, must work for withdrawal of the no-confidence motion, but the *Seiyūkai* should press forward consistent with what it believes."[15]

Saionji had considered resigning as president of the party

even before this time, but Hara and Matsuda had persuaded him to postpone a decision until after the current crisis had passed. Saionji agreed. His speech of February 10 was the last formal statement he made to the party and it constitutes an interesting valedictory. Painful as the immediate problem was, it must have given him a sense of satisfaction to see the party strong enough and sure enough of parliamentary principles and practice to be prepared to defy the oligarchy and the military. He must have expected his party to continue to press for reform and for the ouster of the Katsura cabinet. The success of this movement probably strengthened him in his decision to retire as president, for it emphasized the fact that he had accomplished all he could in this role. In his speech he differentiated between himself as a *jin-shi* (loyal minister) and the members of the party as representatives of the people. He had conceived of his role as one of fostering the gradual growth and strengthening of the party; the party was ready now to assume a new role in which other leadership (i.e., Hara's) would be more appropriate. The events of January and February, 1913, signaled the beginning of a new phase in Japanese political history, a phase in which the parties were to play a more important role than before. Saionji had had much to do with bringing this about. In addition he helped make possible the transition by his support for Admiral Yamamoto as the next premier.

THE RESOLUTION OF THE CRISIS

Saionji's own role changed by virtue of this larger change; he assumed, in retirement from active politics, the position of a full-fledged member of the Genrō. When the Genrō met to choose Katsura's successor, Saionji was asked to join the group. Hara reported hearing the following from Saionji:

> At the meeting of the Genrō Yamagata urged Saionji to form another cabinet. Saionji replied that his health made this impossible. Saionji then said, "In the British system is it not the practice for the majority party to hold political power? Considering conditions in Japan, should we not operate in this way in the future?" Finally, when the Genrō declined to move in the direction of the British system Saionji proposed Yamamoto.[16]

It is clear from this that Saionji played a key role in the selection of the next premier. He said as much when he defended himself from the charge that he gave up and retired because he could not control the *Seiyūkai*. He said, "As proof that I did not retire, I was the one who did most of the work in getting the Yamamoto Gombei cabinet set up."[17]

Genrō approval of Yamamoto as a candidate and his acceptance opened the way to negotiate the make-up of the cabinet. Hara's diary substantiates Saionji's statement that he worked hard to establish the Yamamoto cabinet and gives a clear picture of the way these negotiations were carried on:

> Because of the need to strike while conditions were right, we had to set up a cabinet soon. Saionji already was unable to form one; if Yamamoto also failed, then we would be trapped by Katsura and there would be the danger of the reemergence of a bureaucratic cabinet. Therefore it was of the utmost importance that the Yamamoto cabinet be established and we made every effort to accomplish this. . . . Saionji himself cannot step forward [as premier] so if his nominee, Yamamoto, cannot form a cabinet because the *Seiyūkai* withholds its approval, then Saionji will lose his power to speak out in the meetings of the Genrō.[18]

Significant results came from the negotiations between Yamamoto and the *Seiyūkai*. Yamamoto wanted Hara and Matsuda to join, but thought that two party men would be enough; the *Seiyūkai* demanded at least three places. The fact that the party was in a position to demand something indicates how far the idea of party participation had been accepted. Makino Nobuaki stepped in as mediator and persuaded Yamamoto to accept three party men.

However, the most important outcome of the negotiations was the formal agreement drawn up between Yamamoto and the *Seiyūkai*, which established party participation in the cabinet as a principle. Hara described the agreement thus:

> At last, at that session of the House of Representatives [February 19] the establishment of the Yamamoto cabinet was approved in the form on which we had decided at the conference committee meeting. Moreover, before that we negotiated with Yamamoto and received his consent that, with

> the exception of the premier and the army, navy, and foreign ministers' portfolios, cabinet members would all be selected from among party members [i.e., men who already belonged or who would join as a precondition].[19]

The formal establishment of the Yamamoto cabinet brought to an end three months of the most serious political unrest the country had known since the early years after the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution. The formal ceremonies were capped by a speech by Yamamoto in which he gave strong support to the principle of party participation in the government. He said:

> I am beginning this work with the expectation of conducting political affairs in keeping with constitutional principles. Long ago, when I heard from Prince Itō his plans for establishing the *Seiyūkai*, I expressed my sympathy and agreement with him in this undertaking. This is the reason that, when I received the imperial command, I went ahead and formed a cabinet, placing great reliance on the *Seiyūkai*. Therefore, I want to pay tribute to you and assure you of my profound respect for the principles and pronouncements of your party. I want now, publicly, to declare my belief that political affairs should be managed in accord with the spirit of these principles.[20]

The importance of the precedents thus established cannot be overestimated. For the first time parties had succeeded in playing a decisive role in bringing about the downfall of a cabinet; for the first time a party, as a political institution, had been recognized as having the *right* to exercise a controlling voice in the make-up of a cabinet. Party members thus became eligible to join a cabinet by virtue of their party membership. Of course the oligarchs did not surrender their prerogatives of consultation and designation, but they had been forced to admit the legitimacy of the parties' claims to a share in the political processes.

Saionji deserves much credit for establishing this principle. Many members of the *Seiyūkai* and much of the general public were dissatisfied with the results of these long negotiations; Saionji believed that much had been achieved. He saw the situation, not as a struggle between good and evil, but as a question of the adjustment of the various factors involved to allow for orderly progress and development in the political structure.

The establishment of the Yamamoto cabinet ended Saionji's work as president of the *Seiyūkai* and marked the beginning of his role as a member of the Genrō.

He wrote to Hara:

> Thank you for your letter. . . . I fear I have caused you trouble in writing to me the details of the recent political disturbances; it is my desire that you should bravely push forward for the sake of the country. I shall be greatly relieved if you can arrange for me to resign both the presidency of the party and my membership in the party. I hope you can do this. I leave the question of reorganization completely to your and Matsuda's discretion, so please arrange this in an appropriate way. The more I reflect on the matter the more convinced I am that the best policy at this time, both for the commonweal and for me personally, is to leave politics in both name and fact. However, if there should be an imperial summons, I would do my utmost to fulfill my duty and assist the Emperor. It is my heartfelt desire to make any small contribution I can to the practical development of constitutional government. Please do keep this fact in mind.
>
> It troubles me to say it again, but I cannot go to Tokyo, much as I would like to see you, Prime Minister Yamamoto, and my other friends; my health is rather precarious and I must remain quiet. Please bear with me in this situation and pass on my greetings to the Prime Minister and the others.
>
> That is all for now. I shall look forward to hearing from you.
>
> Sincerely,
> Kimmochi
>
> March 1 [1913]
> His Excellency Hara
> Minister of the Interior[21]

Although he felt that he had retired from active political life, this letter makes clear Saionji's continued interest in political affairs. It is of particular importance to note the emphasis he placed on his desire to be of service to the Emperor *and* to assist in the development of constitutional government; again the ambivalence of his outlook is revealed. Saionji evidently hoped that in leaving the active political arena he could reconcile these two desires in his new role, that of Genrō. It remains for further research to determine how successful he was in fulfilling this desire.

NOTES

1. *Hara Kei Nikki* (Tokyo, 1950), IV, 326, August 26, 1911. Hereafter cited as *Hara*.
2. Letter from Saionji to Hara dated November 22, 1912. These letters are held in the Hara Memorial Building in Morika. Copies were furnished me by Mr. Hara Keiichirō, Hara's son. Hereafter cited as Hara Papers.
3. It is difficult to evaluate this political fiction. The emperor did not exercise power except in an emergency, yet the Genrō, powerful as they were, could not act without consulting him. The Taishō Emperor occupied a much less important place than the Meiji Emperor had. In this case an appeal to the emperor amounted to an appeal to Yamagata, the most powerful Genrō.
4. *Hara*, V, 150, December 2, 1912.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151, December 2, 1912.
6. Hara Papers, Saionji letter dated December 6, 1912.
7. *Hara*, V, 154, December 6, 1912.
8. Kobayashi, Yugo. *Rikken Seiyūkai Shi*, III, 602, Dec. 24, 1912 (Tokyo, 1924).
9. Kimura, Ki (ed.). *Saionji Kimmochi Jiden* (Tokyo, 1949), pp. 145–147.
10. *Hara*, V, 166-167, January 16, 1913.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 168, January 18, 1913.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 188, February 9, 1913.
13. Since the new Taishō Emperor did not participate actively in political affairs, this message was probably prepared for the Emperor by Yamagata, or, at least, at his and Katsura's behest.
14. *Seiyūkai shi*, III, 656-658.
15. *Seiyūkai shi*, III, 653.
16. *Hara*, V, 193, February 11, 1913.
17. Kimura, *Jiden*, p. 166.
18. *Hara*, V, 196-197, February 13-19, 1913.
19. *Hara*, V, 198-199, February 13-19, 1913.
20. *Seiyūkai shi*, III, 680, February 22, 1913.
21. Hara Papers, Saionji letter dated March 1, 1913.