

Tokyo is Burning

Japan saves energy by keeping office buildings at 82 degrees. Is this foresighted or perverse?

By Daniel Gross | Newsweek Web Exclusive

I should have suspected something was amiss when we—the group of journalists I'm traveling with in Japan for 10 days—showed up at the offices of the media company Nikkei, and our Japanese counterparts, columnists, and editors apologized for not wearing ties. We had received instructions that meetings were business formal, jacket and tie. But after a few minutes, we understood why our Japanese colleagues had gone business casual. The air conditioner in their brand-new Tokyo office tower seemed to be on the fritz. It was as hot and muggy as Miami.

Shuttling about the city, I thought I had discovered an epidemic of air-conditioning malfunction. The same experience of tieless Japanese officials welcoming sweating Americans was repeated at the Foreign Ministry, the Bank of Japan, and the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Japan. A conference room at the Japan Iron and Steel Federation was like a sweatbox. This was a true mystery, since Japan is famous for 1) business formality and 2) developing cooling technology. Every morning, I marvel at the wall-length bathroom mirrors in my hotel on which a perfect rectangle above the sink remains miraculously steam-free.

But I soon solved the mystery of the failing air conditioner. Japan has eagerly embraced technology and practices that will reduce emissions and combat global warming. It invented hybrid vehicles, has extensive mass-transit systems, and uses wind power. In 2005, Environment Minister Yuriko Koike, a pioneering female politician, was seeking ways to slash energy use. And she came up with the Cool Biz campaign. The idea: Government would cut energy bills by keeping thermostats in its buildings at 28 degrees Celsius—82.4 degrees Fahrenheit—during the summer. It quickly produced results and was adopted by the business establishment as well. Since Japan's energy mavens realized that simply unbuttoning a shirt collar can make people feel about 4 degrees cooler, dressing down became part of the Cool Biz mentality. (Here's an ABC News story on the phenomenon.) The only people we met with this week wearing suits, ties, and cufflinks were Americans—diplomats at the embassy and the boosters from the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan.

The progenitor of Cool Biz practices what she preaches. Koike is sort of the Hillary Clinton of Japan. A former television anchor and reporter, she served as the nation's first female defense minister and then mounted an unsuccessful challenge for her party's leadership. She's still trying to break Japan's iron ceiling. We visited Koike in her (boiling) district office, discussing politics while a highlight reel of her broadcasting career played on a television. "It's important that we create a low-carbon society," she said. "It will make our economy more wealthy." As we exited the building, finding relief in the heavy evening air, Koike was whisked away in a Prius.

Don't get me wrong. Turning up the thermostat in the summer and turning it down in the winter is a fine way to reduce energy use and fight global warning. But if we're going to go down this road as a global business community, we might consider allowing professionals to show up to work in shorts and T-shirts.

And it struck me that Cool Biz might be counterproductive for Japan. Japan is currently facing something of an existential crisis. Its economy has grown very slowly for more than a decade, and its population is declining. It's as if the nation has lost its capacity for hard work and procreation.

Kiyoaki Fujiwara, director of the economic policy bureau of the Japan Business Federation, laid out some stark charts showing a rapid population decline over the next 50 years and the dire economic impact it would have. But maybe there's some connection between Japan's demographic/economic issues and the Cool Biz program. For a good chunk of the year, the heat indoors saps the desire to write a business plan or to increase the population. As the noted Japan expert Cole Porter memorably put it: "It's Too Darn Hot."