INTRODUCTION

The aims of this chapter are twofold. It will first outline developments in the social policy field in Japan up to the early 1970s. It will then look in some detail at the arguments after that time on two issues: medical care for the aged and the reform of the pensions system, finally reviewing briefly the situation as it existed in those areas in 1985.1

SOCIAL POLICY TO 1973

The Prewar Background

The main features of social policy up to 1945 can be summarised fairly briefly.2 Two main factors served to inhibit government initiatives to legislate for the welfare of the nation as a whole. First and most significant was a long-standing conviction, based on traditional Confucian moral teachings, that the family and the local community were the proper organs for the relief of distress. In the Tokugawa period the feudal han and bakufu governments had intervened only when famine or other disasters threatened the regime itself; this attitude was inherited by the rulers of Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The second factor was the dominance in post-Restoration Japan of the doctrines of laissez-faire economics, which reinforced traditional attitudes by insisting that intervention was not only unnecessary, but positively harmful. The result was that much of the responsibility for the relief of the poor was left in the hands of private charitable institutions. At the same time, employers – both public and private – increasingly provided for the needs of their own workers, either directly, or by encouraging them in self-help through mutual aid associations. Such positive steps as the government did
take were motivated by an almost obsessive fear of social unrest, or were a response to the needs of specific groups – veterans and war widows, for example – directly affected by government policy.

Despite the partial nature of government provision, a large body of welfare specialists did grow up, many of them armed with a high degree of commitment and expertise. One particularly important group were the Welfare Commissioners (*Hōmen lin*, the precursors of the postwar *Minsei lin*). They were first established after the Rice Riots of 1918 as an attempt to suppress social unrest by identifying its causes. By 1940 there were over 100,000 commissioners, the great majority of whom saw themselves as voluntary welfare workers rather than as instruments of social control. (A whole body of other organisations had been created by this time to perform this latter function.) With workers in private charitable bodies, and supported on the whole by the officials of the Social Bureau of the Home Ministry, the *Hōmen lin* formed a committed and vocal pressure group, which consistently advocated improvements in social policy legislation. However, it was not until the defeat of Japan in 1945 that an atmosphere existed where their efforts could be really effective.

The Postwar Occupation, 1945–52

*Background*

After the surrender in 1945, the Supreme Commander, Allied Powers (SCAP) exercised complete control over all activities of the Japanese government. Jurisdiction over welfare matters was in the hands of the Public Health and Welfare Section (PH&W) of the Supreme Command, which was staffed, on the whole, with liberal and often idealistic officers. It is clear, moreover, that after an initial period of uncertainty and tension a close rapport was established between PH&W and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Only in the very early stages of the Occupation was SCAP policy enforced predominantly by directives from PH&W to the Japanese side. There was a rapid transition to a system of continuing consultation; a PH&W directive would often be a mere formality, initiating a policy worked out in advance by both sides. It is not always easy, therefore, to determine whether a particular policy originated on the American or Japanese ‘side’. By the same token, the formal end of the Occupation did not signal any dramatic changes of policy direction; by this time PH&W appears to have been holding little than a watching brief.