

Think AirCare's tough? You could be living in Japan

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TOKYO
ONE OF THE first things a North American motorist might notice about Japan is that the automobiles here all seem so shiny and new, without smashed headlights, dents, rust or even dirt.

The reason is only partly that Japanese fastidiousness extends to the maintenance of cars.

Rather, experts say, there really are relatively few old cars in Japan, because of an automobile

inspection system that is so onerous and expensive that many people prefer to trade in a perfectly good three- or five-year-old car rather than spend hundreds or even thousands of dollars for the inspection.

The inspection system, critics say, is a case study of the regulations in Japan that benefit businesses at the expense of hard-pressed consumers. It is the type of regulation that Japan's new government is promising to relax as part of a major effort to improve living conditions.

"The people who profit from this are maintenance shops and car makers," said Fumio Matsuda, head of the Japan Automobile Consumers Union.

Japan's 83,000 garages obtain 44 per cent of their roughly \$60 billion in annu-

al revenues as a result of mandatory inspections. Automobile companies benefit because people replace their cars frequently.

Inspections are required when a car turns three years old, then every two years until the car turns 11, then every year. The inspections, which cover more than 100 items from brake function to headlight orientation, are done by a government test centre or by an authorized service station.

Other nations and many states and provinces in North America also require inspections, either of emissions alone or also of the car's functioning, but Japan also requires car owners to have certain items checked or serviced every six months, 12 months or 24 months.

Another big difference is that Japan's government asks the owner to have the car repaired before it is inspected, so that it will pass. Faced with this requirement, most owners give their car to the dealer or a service station to prepare it for inspection.

"You take it to the garage and they will just change everything, even if there is nothing wrong with the car," Kenichi

Ohmae, organizer of Heisei Reform, a movement that advocates less government control over Japan's economy, said. "If they keep fiddling with the car, there are more problems after the inspection."

A typical bill for this pre-inspection inspection is about \$720 Cdn. The actual inspection at a test centre costs only about \$14.

Government officials defend the inspection system as necessary to keep traffic flowing. In Japan, where congestion is horrendous and highways often have only two lanes in each direction, a vehicle breakdown is far more disruptive than in the spacious United States, they say.

"Inspection actually contributes to the situation where most of our automobiles run in good condition," said Takashi Shimodaira, director of the maintenance service division of the transport ministry.

He said that only one in 2,000 car accidents in Japan was caused by mechanical failure, compared with between one in 200 and one in 20 in the United States and Europe.

In the United States, 64.1 per cent of passenger cars in 1991 were at least five years old. In Japan, only 46.8 per cent were. In the United States, 30.5 per cent of cars were at least 10 years old, versus 9.6 per cent in Japan.

With little demand for used cars, cars here lose their value quickly. "A car more than six years old and in very good condition you can easily see in a junkyard," said Hiroshige Hanabusa, who makes a living helping people with the administrative chores associated with their cars. □

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