



And the Winner Is ...

I think about half of the frequent readers of A Story A Week are located here in Japan; the rest are scattered here and there around the world. Many of those are in America, and this weekend perhaps not too many of them can pay much attention to our weekly story; they are now coming to the climax of their long election campaign, and in a few days they will elect a new president.

The process has taken them just around two years. Those of us who live in countries with a parliamentary system - where elections are not scheduled in advance - look on this in some amazement. The recent campaign in Canada for example, lasted about six weeks, and even that seems a bit long for the Japanese. The next national election campaign here is expected to take about two weeks from start to finish. Now of course, under any political system, the politicians themselves are always 'campaigning' in one sense or another, but that the American people are willing to let the process dominate their lives for such a long time seems quite incredible. I can only assume that it's like that because they want it that way!

Complaining about our government and politicians is part and parcel of life in any society of course, and it seems that no matter who is in power, incompetence and scandals will still be daily fodder for our newspapers. It is easy to become a bit depressed about our modern political systems - until we remember that famous quote from Winston Churchill to the effect that 'democracy is the second worst possible form of government.' When queried about which was the worst, his reply would come "All the others!"

His implication of course was that although modern democratic systems have many flaws, they are still the best format yet devised for organizing a society with a workable balance between individual needs and general social requirements. As much as we might complain about our politicians, and feel that we have no power at all to change things, it could be a lot worse ... as indeed it has been for most people through most of human history.

I have my own theory about democracy, but I'm not sure if there is any way that it could be tested. I'm thinking that if, instead of citizens going to a polling station to cast ballots we had a system where the winners of individual races were chosen by a coin flip, we would be no worse off at all.

Now actually, I'm not joking. In modern democracies like ours, most of the parties have basically sensible policies. In truth, politicians are quite severely circumscribed in what they can do, by fiscal and social practicalities, and whether or not Party A or Party B is in power this year, is not perhaps so important.

But what is important - extremely important - is that we switch groups every once in a while. Our American friends provide the most visible example of this. Whenever they go through an extended period when one party is dominant - they go off the rails. The mood then swings back the other way for a while, and the country thus manages to stay basically stable. A 'random' coin flip would serve the same function. The important core point is not that the electorate is allowed to make a selection, but that the people in power agree to leave. In many places around the world, this does not happen. Sham elections may be held, but the incumbents never have any intention of stepping down. In modern true democracies though, even at the end of what may have been long and bitter campaigns, the losers pack their bags and leave, even though they may be personally convinced that their loss is 'the end of democracy in our country'.

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It never is of course, and as long as they do agree to pack their bags and leave, it never will be. Their turn will come again; it always comes again.

(Except of course ... here in Japan!)

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