



Choices, Choices ...

I was awakened this morning by a fairly extensive announcement coming over the city loudspeaker system. This system is most frequently fired up to let us all know of a fire in the neighbourhood, or for a missing person report (usually dementia sufferers who have wandered away from their home), but today's broadcast was more prosaic - it's election day here in Japan, and the announcer reminded us of this, gave information on when/where we should go to cast our ballots, and ended with a strong exhortation to 'get out and vote'.

I used 'we' and 'us' in that sentence, but in a figurative manner only. Even though I have now been resident in this country for over a quarter century, I have no right to vote. That is reserved for those who hold Japanese *citizenship*; residency is no factor. I read in my newspaper now and then that some countries have a great deal of difficulty with voter registration - trying to verify who can vote - but this is a non-issue here. A short time before election day, all citizens get a postcard in the mail from their city hall (which of course knows who lives where, due to the residence registration system), which they take to the polling station to confirm their identity.

Voting is not compulsory, and in recent years a huge imbalance has developed in the demographics of voting patterns. Very high percentages of seniors are voting, but very low percentages of young people are doing so. A cynic would look at that pattern and perhaps assume that it is because the older generation is concerned about preserving their entitlements, while the youngsters are apathetic, seeing no bright future no matter who gets elected, and I suppose these considerations are indeed a factor. But when I was chatting with an elderly neighbour the other day and that topic came up, he expressed a different motivation. He very much had a 'use it, or lose it' attitude, and was concerned that the younger generations were taking democracy too much for granted. He was only a child back in the pre-war time when the military had a major hand in running Japan, so doesn't remember that situation first hand, but his war-time experiences have of course not been forgotten. He votes every time, without fail.

Hearing his conversation, I basically found myself nodding in agreement, but did so a bit hypocritically. Although I am not permitted to vote in Japan at any level - national, prefectural, local - I *am* a citizen of two other nations (Canada and the United Kingdom), both of which allow (and encourage) overseas residents to participate in elections. But even though I thus actually have quite a few opportunities to vote, I have never done so.

Now this is partly because it would take some effort on my part to do so. I would need to register with the appropriate consular authorities for each country, be engaged enough to follow the election cycles, and then take the time and trouble to do whatever was necessary to procure the paperwork and cast my ballot. Over and above those factors though, is the sense that I really *shouldn't* try and vote in either of those jurisdictions. In truth, I have very little current knowledge of either society; my local media pays some attention to British events, but none at all to Canadian affairs. How on earth would I made an informed decision about voting? Ask my daughters for advice?

So in the end, I do nothing. There simply is nowhere that I am able to cast votes, so in that sense, I am pretty much disenfranchised. Well, so be it. There are other ways to make one's influence felt though, and looking at the shelf of files containing clippings of magazines and newspapers that contain interviews I have done over the years, in many of which I discuss my thoughts about social affairs, I am not worried about the fact that I am not allowed to head down to the polls today to make my choice between the LDP and the DPJ.

There are plenty of ways to skin a cat!

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