

POINT OF VIEW/ Kiyomi Tsujimoto

We don't just vote, we line up the factions

Special to Asahi Evening News

Japan is a democratic country. The people's will is reflected in representatives elected to the Diet, and these members vote to decide the direction of the national government as well as make laws.

At least that is what is supposed to happen. The reality is a bit different, however. I came to this realization after becoming a Diet member.

For instance, there is the matter of the consumption tax. This indirect tax was raised from 3 percent to 5 percent on April 1 but the hike had already been decided on back in 1995. The issue was hotly debated in the Lower House election of October 1996 (in which I stood as a candidate for the first time and was elected).

Election results showed a majority of elected Diet members condoning the hike to 5 percent, apparently reflecting the voters' will. As the implementation date neared, however, it was reported that the majority of the public stood opposed. The media carried an article saying that the hike was being implemented because of insufficient efforts by the Social Democratic Party, to which I belong.

But isn't this ridiculous? Those opposed to the consumption tax hike all

said they did not change their minds yesterday but had opposed the bill from long before.

In other words, voters cast their votes for candidates in favor of hiking the consumption tax and then complained about the tax hike.

The SDP fought the election arguing for basic review of the consumption tax hike, but we suffered a disastrous defeat, having the party's seat strength reduced from 65 to 15.

We won only 15 seats out of a total of 500 seats in the Lower House, suggesting what little trust the people have in our party.

Therefore, even though the SDP is a participant in the coalition government, it would be inaccurate to say the tax hike was implemented half a year after the election because of a lack of effort by the Social Democrats.

In the Diet, everything is decided on the strength of the numbers, according



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to the strictest numerical logic. This logic itself conforms to the logic of democracy. But many Japanese have either forgotten this strict logic or pretend they have forgotten it when voting.

That is why after the election they suddenly denounced the incompetence and shortcomings of political parties they had not even voted for.

It is the same in citizen campaigns. Most either disregard or despise the Diet and its members. But when one or two friends or neighborhood acquaintances are elected, they change completely and place excessive hopes on them. They tend to forget that the newly elected are only one or two among 500 Lower House members.

I confronted this reality when I became the person in charge of the NPO (non-profit organization) bill project team of the SDP immediately after becoming a Diet member.

This bill aimed at giving corporate status to citizen campaign bodies, non-governmental organizations and non-profit organizations. But the Diet majority consists of conservative members who believe "volunteers are charitable people who work for nothing."

Volunteer groups played a key role in helping the victims of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, thus forcing moves to present a bill in the national legislature.

It now appears, however, that this bill will be voted into law only after being distorted into one resembling a government-control law.

In order to achieve a freer NPO law, many more liberal Diet members must be elected. But people involved in citizens' campaigns consider the inadequacies of the bill an indication of the incompetence of the pro-citizen Diet members that they voted into office in the first place.

Those activists were supposed to be democrats who understand that Diet decisions are the outcome of numerical votes but instead they have become disillusioned that all major bills will be distorted as a result of a *ganbari* (doggedness) persistence by only one or two Diet members.

I had the same preconception before I became a lawmaker. After serving as a Diet member for half a year, I keenly feel the need to clearly redefine the democratic system of Japan.

Major newspapers of this country are still debating the stupid question of "whether Diet members should be elected because of their policies or their personalities."

The author is a Lower House member and the founder of the non-governmental organization called the Peace Boat.