

THE BLUE BIRD

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Heil Hitler!
Dainippon Teikoku Banzai!

These two salutes are well-known epitomes of totalitarianism. Fortunately for us, nobody forces us to use these or similar salutes today. We are living in a democratic nation in an age of freedom.

But I feel that we take democracy for granted. A good example of this is the House of Councilors elections held last July. All of Japan was sweltering with the fiery heat of the election campaign. The candidates' voices on the microphone, as well as reporting by the mass media, rose in intensity as the extremely sensitive peacekeeping issue was debated. When the results came, however, it became clear that only one out of every two eligible voters took to the police - the second lowest turnout in postwar history.

What is the cause of this political apathy? I feel there are two basic reasons:

One reason is the fact that the Japanese people never really had to fight to obtain democracy. The Taisho Democracy of the 1920's may have bloomed into full-fledged democracy, but unfortunately it was nipped off at the bud by the militarists of the 1930's. The democracy we know today was a present to the Japanese people from Douglas MacArthur for losing the war. Therefore, we do not treasure democracy as much as we would if we really had to fight to obtain it.

The second reason is the current political process, which has led to a strong sense of disillusionment. Many people tend to think, "No matter how many people vote, the Liberal-Democratic Party controls Japan. Sure, we are dissatisfied with the status quo, but what's the point in voting if nothing changes?" It seems as if Japan's opposition parties exist only to oppose; they do not have the mettle to become the ruling party. A good example is that even the Social Democratic Party of Japan does not field enough candidates to become the ruling party even if all of its candidates win.

Today, in Japan, healthy politics, in which our opinions actually influence the political process and steer our country, seems similar to Maeterlinck's Blue Bird - so fervently wanted, yet so distant and seemingly beyond our reach. Recently, however, the citizens of a country on the opposite side of the globe have taken a successful first step in their quest for the Blue Bird.

Having experienced two decades of military rule, Brazil was once a nation whose people, especially students, were renowned for their passive and disorganized character. But when a huge scandal in the administration of Fernando Collor de Mello came into light this year, the people were up in arms. They ignored Collor's calls for support and took to the streets dressed in black from tip to toe in a day of national mourning. Students, enraged by Collor's hypocrisy, spearheaded protests in cities throughout the country. On October 6, the entire Brazilian nation was wildly celebrating the president's impeachment, as well as their victory in a battle to defend their young democracy.

The political process is not identical in Brazil and Japan. But, as in those Brazilians, there should be an ever-lasting flame somewhere in our hearts; a flame of desire for a better country; a flame strong enough to make us despair at the injustice we see in politics today; a flame which can bring about change. This flame may be but a small flicker of light, but we must fan it into a roaring conflagration of change. How are we to achieve this? Voting is the answer.

Each and every one of us must cast the vote, with a sense of responsibility for making this a better country. If we do not, we are being delinquent in our responsibility as members of a democratic society. Not casting the vote is tantamount to saying, "I don't care what kind of government we have; bring on the dictators; take away my freedom, my rights, and my hopes."

At the same time, we must be aware of the issues and vote responsibly. We must not be hoodwinked into making wrong decisions. In the last election in July, there was a mini-political party called *Kaze-no-Kai*. This party was potentially attractive to some voters because it had the backing of many prominent and well-known individuals, including Beat Takeshi. The leader of this party, however, is an ultra-rightist. Just what do you think would happen if people voted for this party without considering its political beliefs?

I mention this last item because there was a nation in which something similar happened. In the early 1930's, an ultra-rightist party with a charismatic leader was voted into office by people who didn't usually vote. They were taken away by the magnetic personality of the leader and voted for his party for superficial reasons. The party's name: The National Socialist German Workers' Party, better known as the Nazi Party. The leader: Adolf Hitler. The rest is history.

We must always remember that a democratic nation is a reflection of its constituents. If we want to make government better, we must act. We must have a desire to defend freedom and justice. We must realize that the Blue Bird of healthy politics is never beyond our reach. Whether we find the Blue Bird or not depends on the will of each and every one of us to fulfill our responsibility of voting.