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The End of the Democratic Experiment□□民主という実験の集結

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Translation by Gavan McCormack

The departure of former leader, Ozawa Ichiro, from the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) signifies that the twenty year-long effort at reform of politics and realignment of the political party system has come to a dead end. It was just twenty years ago, in the summer, that the resignation of Deputy Prime Minster Kanemaru Shin over political fund problems led to crisis within the Takeshita faction and the search for a way to reform Japanese party politics.



Ozawa at press conference announcing the departure of 50 DPJ members

And always at the centre of the process was Ozawa Ichiro. Perhaps it is an irony that each step forward Japanese politics made was at the price of an Ozawa defeat. Ozawa's designs failed dismally, in the Takeshita factional contest, the collapse of the non-LDP Hosokawa coalition government, the collapse of the Shinshinto, with the end result being merger in the DPJ.

In 2006, the DPJ crisis over the so-called forged email incident provided another occasion for Ozawa to take action. From the time soon after he was appointed leader (Representative) of the DPJ, I met with him often for discussions and we were in total agreement on steps that needed to be taken to achieve change of government. We became convinced that an Ozawa-led DPJ would have to overthrow the LDP government. Ozawa felt a sense of crisis over the divisions of Japanese society caused by the structural reform policies of the LDP under the leadership of Koizumi Junichiro. He repositioned the DPJ along a livelihood-first policy line. Having been urging the DPJ to adopt social democratic policies and livelihood protection as its axis, I felt that in Ozawa, the true successor of the LDP's Tanaka faction, I had found the one who best understood it.

Without Ozawa there could not have been any change of government. Now, however, because of Ozawa, the DPJ has split. This contradiction shows the DPJ's limitation.

The greatest failure of the DPJ was that the livelihood-first policy promoted by Ozawa turned out to be just a pretext for power struggle. The trigger for the party split was the contradiction between raising the consumption tax and adhering strictly to the Party Manifesto.

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If in principle livelihood-first had been shared as basic principle, then cooperation on taxation should have been possible, since taxation is after all just a means. However, Prime Minister Noda saw the need to increase the consumption tax, a means, as an absolute, while Ozawa sought the meaning of his existence in strict formal adherence to the Manifesto. Both were at fault for their absence of principle.

The DPJ is a patchwork party resulting from the single seat electorate system and it is blindingly obvious that to look to it for ideology is like climbing a tree to look for fish. Nevertheless, contemplating the debauched excesses of late capitalism and thinking about what should be done in politics I came to believe that I could share the livelihood-first-ism as an idea with DPJ. However, that dream too has collapsed.

Even if the DPJ under Prime Minister Noda survives as a vessel, it is no more than a replica of the LDP. In that sense, the experiment that was the DPJ has ended. Through our various experiments and mistakes we have come to know the obvious truth that a political party needs to share an ideal of the desirable society and that the single-seat electorate does not automatically produce a two party system.

What politicians of the DPJ who pursue the dream of regime change have to do is simple. It is to recall what they wanted to do and to think out how to offer policy choices towards accomplishing it. Now that the party leadership seems to be suffused with a peculiar sense of triumph over cutting Ozawa adrift, I hope they will challenge the party leadership to debate the issues.

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