

Roll up! Roll up! For a Freak Show Starring 'Koizumi's Children'

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By Philip Brasor

Adding salt to its wounds, it was reported recently that the Democratic Party of Japan paid 129 million yen to the American public relations firm Fleischmann-Hillard to buff its image in 2004. Though it might have helped in last year's Upper House election, the company's strategy didn't seem to work so well at last month's general election, which the DPJ lost big time to the Liberal Democratic Party.

The LDP itself spent 2.7 billion yen for PR services in 2004, but before you say "worth every penny," think carefully about what it was that won this election for them. It wasn't Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's one-note message of postal reform, but rather a combination of the so-called Koizumi Theater made up of media-propelled candidates and the peculiar arithmetic used to determine winners in national polls. As economics Professor Kaneko Masaru said on at least one TV talk show last week, the LDP attracted the kind of people who usually don't vote by fielding the kind of people who usually don't run.

What you get is the kind of lawmakers who usually don't make laws. This is not an anomaly. Anyone who pays attention to the political situation in Japan understands that the National Assembly doesn't guide the country's policies. The politicians are led by the bureaucracy, which writes the bills that get

passed and then implements them, and that includes Koizumi's beloved postal privatization plan. The job of national politicians is to make sure their constituents get something out of this arrangement. In return the politicians can get re-elected and enjoy a career.

Political rookies

Candidates without political experience are nothing new. But in the past, the celebrities who were recruited by the LDP to run for national office at least had their celebrity. They started out well-known, which is half the battle in an election campaign. Koizumi's recruitment of what the media termed "assassins" to run against LDP "traitors" (party members who voted against his postal privatization plan) worked the same way. The media covered these candidates extensively and as a result more people voted.

Also, the LDP garnered more votes than expected for its proportional representation candidates, where you simply vote for the party and the seats are allocated to candidates on a roster drawn up by the said party. Those candidates were not only not politicians, they were not even famous.

Cult of personality

What we get are the 83 new LDP Diet members dubbed the "Koizumi children." Basically a cult of personality, these rookies need a manual to know what to say to the media, and applauded ecstatically during the prime minister's Sept. 26 policy speech. New DPJ president Seiji Maehara said afterward that the 83 "clapped in

places where you're not supposed to clap, but then that seems to be their role."



Some members of this group, having exerted no effort to get elected, are said to have enjoyed a "windfall" (tanabota), while their election has provided the press with its own windfall.

Shukan Bunshun ran a feature that graded all 83 newcomers in terms of their "Koizumi-do" (level of loyalty to the prime minister), "senkyo-ryoku" (how much their victory was based on factors that had nothing to do with them), and "shiroto-do" (level of inexperience).

Shukan Shincho zeroed in on the two most controversial "children."

Satsuki Katayama is portrayed as a haughty

prima donna who bristles at suggestions she's an amateur. Katayama spent 23 years as a bureaucrat in the Finance Ministry and knows her way around the Diet in Nagatacho. "Everybody just asks me elementary questions," she snapped at reporters. "You people have to study more." She has a point, but Shincho and other media play up what they see is her arrogance, implying that she can now look down on former colleagues who rose higher in the ministry than she did while she was there



'Weirdo'

The other new lawmaker, labeled a "weirdo," by Shukan Shincho is Taizo Sugimura, the 26-year-old Hokkaido native who first used the word tanabota to describe his victory. Sugimura was working as a clerical temp when he stumbled on the web page of the LDP, which was looking for candidates. He signed up on a whim, becoming 35th on the LDP proportional list from the South Kanto bloc.

It was like winning the lottery, and Sugimura reacted accordingly. Informed that his salary would be 25 million yen a year, the underachiever talked about buying a BMW. On camera, he literally became bug-eyed with excitement when he realized he could take green cars on bullet trains for free and gain entrance to ryotei, those expensive, exclusive

restaurants where politicians make deals.

LDP bigwigs reacted negatively, and it's clear from their reaction that they were less concerned with Sugimura's lack of civic conscience than with the possibility that he might blow it for the rest of them. "I don't go to ryotei so often," said LDP Secretary General Tsutomu Takebe.

Sugimura's Sept. 27 press conference, where he apologized for his remarks, was packed, and the reporters got more than they could hope for. The novice lawmaker was humble and hilarious, and the room rocked with laughter at his seemingly disingenuous answers. There are those who think Sugimura's antics hurt the LDP, but as an anonymous LDP staff member told *Asahi Shimbun*, those antics have kept the DPJ's Maehara off the morning news shows.

'Artless candor'

It's important to remember that it was the morning news shows that elected the 83 children in the first place. A few commentators have said that Sugimura will be good for the Diet, since his artless candor is the kind of thing that can shine a light in the dark corners of national politics. But isn't that the job of the media itself? Sugimura's press conference was attended by 150 people while LDP honcho Mikio Aoki (chairman of the LDP's House of Councilors caucus) was testifying before the Tokyo District Court that he didn't remember receiving a bribe from the Japan Dental Association. Some things are more important than others.

This article appeared in The Japan Times, Oct. 9, 2005. Philip Brasor is a Japan-based journalist who writes principally on media and the arts. Posted at Japan Focus on October 18, 2005.