

MEIJI INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL AFFAIRS

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Short Curriculum Vitae: Yoriko Kawaguchi

Ms. Yoriko Kawaguchi is a former Member of the House of Councillors for the Liberal Democratic Party from 2005 to 2013. She was Special Adviser to the Prime Minister of Japan on foreign affairs from 2004 to 2005; Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2002 to 2004 and Minister of the Environment from 2000 to 2002. Prior to this, Ms. Kawaguchi was a Managing Director of Suntory Ltd, Director General of Global Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and Minister at the Embassy of Japan to the United States. Recently after holding a professorship at Meiji Institute for Global Affairs (MIGA), Meiji University from 2013 to March 31, 2017, Ms. Kawaguchi holds a fellowship at MIGA since April 1, 2017. Ms. Kawaguchi holds an M.Phil in Economics from Yale University and BA in International Relations from the University of Tokyo. Ms. Kawaguchi was awarded the Order of the Grand Cordon of the Rising Sun in May, 2017.

Democracy – Today and in the Future

Many people feel that the world has become less stable and uncertain as a result of the U.S. presidential election, coupled with the so-called Brexit referendum that took place in the U.K., both countries of which are upheld as models of democracy. Democracy itself is now being questioned.

The word “democracy” reminds me of the well-worn stone steps at the United States Capitol building. I first visited the U.S. Congress some twenty to thirty years ago. I entered the white Capitol building after a hand baggage inspection at the entrance. As

I climbed the stone (or maybe marble) steps, I noticed the middle of each step was worn down. I heard that the current U.S. Capitol building was completed in the mid 19th century. This is literally the evidence of innumerable electoral constituents who have climbed and descended these steps over the last 150 years. I pondered how many people must have used these steps for them to become so recessed. These indentations demonstrated to me how close Congress is to its electoral constituents. Since then, the stone steps of the Capitol building have become a symbol of democracy for me.

There are two reasons why I was so impressed with the steps into Congress.

In those days, I frequently visited U.S. government buildings on official duties. The security checks to enter government buildings were much stricter than to enter the Capitol in around 1990. For example, when people wanted to enter a government building, they could not do so without an escort in attendance from the department or agency they were visiting.

The steps at the Japanese Diet are covered in red carpet, so we cannot clearly see how worn they are. However, in Japan at that time, although people could casually enter most ministry or agency buildings, the procedure for entering the Diet was quite strict.

Currently, there are concerns about terrorist attacks and suchlike, so I guess that entry security checks have become much stricter in both legislatures and governmental organizations all over the world. That is such a pity.

There was another factor behind my sense that “This is democracy.” It was a phrase I heard from the late Howard Baker, who served as a Republican U.S. Senator and was ambassador to Japan from around 2000. Mr. Baker had been serving as a senator for many years, and during that time, he acted as the Senate Majority Leader and the Senate Minority Leader for similar periods. He said, “I know that rules are most important to run the Senate as I have experience in both the governing and opposition parties. Therefore, I aimed to lead the Senate in accordance with the rules whilst I was the Senate Majority Leader.” I was deeply impressed by this comment, as it describes the core element for the smooth functioning of democracy.

I visited Washington for several days at the beginning of April. During that time,

there were many international political events, such as President Xi Jinping's visit to the U.S., and the bombing of Syria by the U.S. In addition, the conservative wing's Steve Bannon, Chief Strategist and Senior Advisor to President Trump, was withdrawn from membership of the National Security Council (April 5), and there have also been rumors of a power struggle amongst close aides in the White House, with the suggestion that he may also lose his position as chief strategist and senior advisor.

President Trump failed to enact a bill to change the so-called Obama Care despite this being during his first 100 days since the inauguration in what is traditionally defined as the "honeymoon period", while his policy to regulate immigrants has been stymied due to opposition from the judiciary. In terms of public opinion, his popular support rating fell to around mid-30% as of early April, which is the lowest support rating of any president since the war.

It is hard to say that the two-party system fulfills the same role as before in the U.S. Congress. Recently, Congress approved a new Supreme Court justice. At that time, the Republican Party nominee was secured under the law, but only by removing the right to filibuster – long considered an important means of protest for the opposition party – and the nomination was put to a simple majority vote. It is hard to say that the rules were respected.

Democracy is widely accepted as an important means of governance internationally. It is hard for us to understand what is happening in this bastion of democracy. Some may say that this kind of problem has been kept in check by democracy, and this is the cost of democracy, which is not originally a very efficient system, while others may say that this reveals the fundamental flaws of democracy.

I continue to believe that democracy is the best system in terms of representing public opinion. However, there are issues. One is that democracy only really represents the public's opinion at the time of the election. Public opinion as expressed at the ballot box is not always very far-sighted. Historical lessons may also have been overlooked. Of course, the strength of democracy lies in its mechanism for allowing the constantly evolving public opinion to be reflected at the next election. Even so, structural issues that may change significantly in the future along with the stance of future generations,

or past experiences, may not be reflected in the election so easily.

Therefore, I think that improving the knowledge of each voter is essential for the smooth functioning of any democracy. I hope that each individual voter will have the wisdom to consider the past, present and future independently of others, rather than just following the herd. It is impossible for me to over-emphasize the importance of education for that. (End)