

# Wishing to Turn the Clock Back

Tokyo needs all the new ideas it can get for not only is its economic supremacy in Asia at risk but also its strategic role as Beijing becomes ever more assertive, *David Watts* writes



Shinzo Abe soon after his retirement; new Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda

**T**wenty years ago the worldly Japanese were wont to observe that the principal thing the country needed to modernise itself was a political system to match its industrial and technological brilliance.

The other element on the intellectuals' wish list was a print media sector freed of traditions and work practices worthy of the nineteenth century; free to report the realities of modern life outside a hidebound system designed to reinforce authority rather than examine and criticise its performance in governing the country.

For a time, as the new century got underway it looked as though the farsighted Japanese were about to get at least some of what they had been wishing for. There was a new, reforming prime minister in place even if he did come from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has ruled the country continually since World War II except for a brief period. Junichiro Koizumi brought national politics a unique breath of fresh air. He was quirky and different, with a startling quiff of hair that seemed to ape the style of his favourite pop star Elvis

Presley. He even released a CD of his favourite Elvis numbers and, as a single man, appealed to female voters.

His reforms brought hope that the country would break out of its straitjacket, release some of its pent-up talent, and break away from a decade in the economic doldrums. He brought optimism that the ruling party would move decisively into the twenty-first century with policies to match. But in reality the voters were backing the man rather than his policies, with potentially disastrous results for the party and his successor.

For his period in office the magic worked, as far as the public was concerned. But in the background his reforms were gradually beginning to have an effect, particularly his determination to have local authorities bear more of the costs and responsibilities of local projects. Public works and the attendant pork barrel benefits have been the lifeblood of LDP politics since the party's inception. Just as his successor, Shinzo Abe, went to the polls last summer, the true effects of this shifting of the fiscal burden hit home — local tax bills began to skyrocket and rural

voters, the bedrock of LDP support, deserted the party in droves against a background of steep declines in rural employment. The result was arguably the worst defeat since the formation of the LDP in 1955.

But it is simplistic and inaccurate to blame the party's plight on the departed Koizumi. At least as much to blame was the party hierarchy in allowing the machine to regress to its default position — moving to centre stage an hereditary politician who, despite being the dly out

preoccupations — rewriting the constitution to make Japan a 'normal' country and meeting the expectations of the Americans at various levels — were not those of the electorate. And if urban sophisticates might have been expected to share his worldview, they were not about to let that override their day-to-day concerns; and even in the major cities — Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya — they turned against the party.

In spite of his patrician background Abe did not fall on his sword, as even the

with a particularly elderly scion, has the answers to the LDP's conundrum will take some time to resolve but the decision seems to confirm that the party has turned its back on reform; turned its back on a modernising vision of the country just when it would seem to need it most.

If Western countries are spooked by the spectre of China and its industries sweeping all before them, this is something that Japan has been living with for a good deal longer and at a much more profound level. Chinese vegetables and

low-level manufactures have been part of the scene in Japan for a considerable time now, not to mention joint ventures on the mainland as the Japanese desperately try to get to grips with the Chinese big brother. Tokyo needs all the new ideas it can get for not only its economic supremacy in Asia at risk but also its strategic role as Beijing becomes ever more assertive.

Whether Fukuda's conciliatory personality will fit the bill internationally, only time will tell, but he has declared that he will stay away from Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan's war dead are buried and



youngest prime minister since World War II, was profoundly out of touch with ordinary voters and behaved as if Koizumi and his reforms had never been. His slogan for the election was one of the archetypal blue-sky euphemisms so beloved of Japanese politicians that offer much but promise nothing specific — 'Beautiful Japan'.

One would have thought that a prime minister whose uncle and grandfather both had held the office would have been in touch with the voters, but apparently, according to Shinzo Abe, it was the voters who got it wrong: 'The policies we have promoted are not wrong', he said after the election. 'I think the people understand that.' The people understood that Abe's

U.S.-British naval Exercise near Japan

most insensitive politician might have been expected to, but inexplicably left it for weeks before resigning out of the blue. Perhaps, it was a gesture of responsibility with a vote looming on continued support for the American operation in Afghanistan, which the Maritime Self-Defence Force assists by refuelling American naval vessels at sea, which the government had appeared certain to lose.

After a period of turmoil the party leadership again reverted to type and went to another of the LDP's 'royal' families for its next leader — the Fukuda clan's Yasuo Fukuda. Whether another of the clans,

which is a particular bone of contention for Beijing, and pursue a conciliatory line with North Korea. Fukuda won the contest for leadership of the party, which carries with it the prime ministership, against Taro Aso, a former foreign minister, who is decidedly hawkish on both issues.

Perhaps the LDP backroom boys are right and the great Japanese public just wants to turn the clock back to the 1970s and pretend that Japan really is the exception and the rest of the world should just go away and leave it alone. Would that life and politics were so simple.

*David Watts is a Former deputy foreign editor of 'The Times'.*