

## FEATURE

# A Master of Flamboyant Insensitivity

The Japanese foreign minister's gaffes keep the editorial writers at Tokyo newspapers working overtime

By PHILIP J. CUNNINGHAM

It seems that every country possesses a politician who makes the entire nation look undeservedly foolish. Sometimes it's a president or a prime minister. In the case of Japan, the new foreign minister fits the bill, for he has almost single-handedly made his country look more arrogant, callous and uncaring than it is. Who is this anti-diplomat, this politician provocateur? He is Foreign Minister Aso Taro, and a possible successor to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. A master of flamboyant insensitivity, Mr. Aso is racking up a thick file of complaints about his rude, provocative, factually incorrect and just plain ridiculous statements from diplomatic counterparts in Beijing, Seoul, Taipei and Singapore. He's even got America's Jewish Defence League on his case.

Is it possible his many critics are wrong? That he's just trying to be funny? If so, fanning the flames of nationalism in volatile East Asia is no joke. And the hard-working, honest and considerate people of Japan deserve a far better face to the world.

"The foreign minister is the person in charge of Japan's foreign policy," the Asahi Shimbun said with thinly veiled exasperation in a recent editorial. "However, Aso's recent comments about Yasukuni raise doubts about whether he understands the responsibility and weight of that position."

And that's just Mr. Aso's most recent foot-in-the-mouth. If we consider Mr. Aso's classic zingers, on rich Jews for example, one might suspect he was clumsily trying to make up for this when he cancelled meetings last month to

Mr. Aso is racking up a thick file of complaints about his rude, provocative, factually incorrect and just plain ridiculous statements from diplomatic counterparts in Beijing, Seoul, Taipei and Singapore. He's even got America's Jewish Defence League on his case.

free up time for what he described as Ariel Sharon's funeral.

Closer to home, Mr. Aso has insulted Burakumin, (suggesting that ethnic Japanese unfairly subject to apartheid-like discrimination are not fit for government service) and is fond of repeating the canard that Japan is composed of but one race, (ignoring millions of residents of Korean, Chinese and other descent, not to mention the indigenous Ainu).

He has claimed the claim that Korea was better off under Japan's wise colonial rule and that Korean colonial subjects preferred Japanese names to their own. His curt comment late last year saying that the closed door deal on the USJapan base agreement was final and beyond review, still stings in Okinawa.

On Jan 20, 2006 Japan's new foreign minister addressed the Diet detailing his diplomatic vision and political philosophy, one of

the more carefully scripted narratives from the master of malapropisms.

Describing the US as the linchpin of Japan's foreign policy and characterizing China as a considerable threat, Mr. Aso then took pause to explain his view of linguistics. Noam Chomsky would not be amused.

"I would like to touch upon the significance of words in diplomacy," Mr. Aso said. "Given that information is expressed in the form of words, we must ensure that we have a quick ear to gather accurate information as well as a brain to pierce its essence. At the same time, the statements and information emanating from Japan are increasingly carrying more weight. The tenets and beliefs that Japan should transmit to the world cannot be viewed as such until they are first given voice through language and words."

Wow. Now consider some of the brain-piercing gems given voice by Mr. Aso in recent weeks through language and words:

"Speaking for the souls of the departed war heroes, they shouted banzai for the emperor, and none of them did so for the prime minister. If so, I think the emperor should pay visits to the shrine. That would be the best."

No, that would not be for the best, far from it. It might be said that Japan is truly fortunate to have a reigning Emperor in the person of Akihito who wisely gives Yasukuni a wide berth and also refuses to break bread with allegedly pro-emperor rightists who insist on mandatory flag ceremonies and imperial anthem-singing in public schools. Even his father, the former Emperor Hirohito, in whose name the tragic war of conquest on the Asian mainland was waged, made a point of halting ritual visits to Yasukuni shrine after October 1978 when the Class-A war criminals, who had previously been excluded from consideration, were deliberately included among deified warriors to worship.

"It's like when you're told to stop smoking, you feel more like smoking."

That's Mr Aso's take on the Yasukuni controversy. The use of smoking as metaphor to explain the seemingly irrational official visits to the Yasukuni shrine is both a smokescreen and inadvertently revealing. For starters, it illuminates the decidedly childish dynamic at play when politicians deliberately repeat bad behaviour in order not to reward their critics.

Former prime minister Hashimoto Ryutaro, who was considered hawkish a decade ago but is in retrospect looking more and more like a dove compared to the likes of Mr. Aso, more than once demonstrated his contempt for other people's comfort and a willingness to flaunt his power by smoking in prohibited places like airplanes and trains.

**As newspaper magnate  
Watanabe says of Yasukuni and  
its newly refurbished museum,  
"Its exhibits stir up militarism  
and glorify it. There's  
something strange about the  
prime minister going to  
worship there."**

Mr. Aso, being a member of the political elite from birth (his maternal grandfather was prime-minister Yoshida Shigeru and the Aso side of the family were wartime industrialists), exudes the world-is-my-ashtray attitude of the LDP ruling party alpha male.

Finally it is Japan, not China and Korea that is most at risk from the revisionist ideology that spreads like a cancer in Japan's body politic.

Indeed, there are indications the tide is turning against Mr. Koizumi's noxious Yasukuni habit. In a rare show of solidarity, Mr. Koizumi's predecessors as prime minister, including Hashimoto Ryutaro, have asked him to stop the visits.

When quizzed about the wild-eyed revisionist history presented at Yasukuni, (US started the war, Kamikaze bombers are real heroes, the Tokyo trials a sham, etc), Mr. Aso said, “The museum isn’t glorifying war, it’s just conveying how it was at the time.” Even Mr. Koizumi had the sense to hedge that one a bit, saying he didn’t support the view of history presented at Yasukuni.

Polls show that most people in Japan don’t support Mr. Koizumi’s provocative posturing at Yasukuni and even influential right-leaning constituents, such as Yomiuri Shimbun chairman Watanabe Tsuneo are showing increased disenchantment. As newspaper magnate Watanabe says of Yasukuni and its newly refurbished museum, “Its exhibits stir up militarism and glorify it. There’s something strange about the prime minister going to worship there.”

“Thanks to the significant improvement in educational standards and literacy (during the colonization), Taiwan is now a country with a very high education level and it keeps up with the current era.”

There is some merit to the argument that Imperial Japan, when not exploiting the labour and looting the wealth of its colonies, left some valuable infrastructure intact. Teenage Taiwanese girls conscripted to serve as comfort women were clearly not beneficiaries of Japan’s

liberal education policy, but ambitious young Taiwanese men such as future Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui did manage to secure a quality education as long as they remained obedient to the hand that fed.

Even the worst of wars most likely have some positive spin-offs: the Nazis developed the Autobahn and invented the Volkswagen, but is this really the kind of thing a foreign minister should be bragging about? It’s rather like a US Secretary of State revisiting the Vietnam War, skimming over napalm and carpet bombings to conclude that the US occupation of South Vietnam was positive because it raised English standards in Saigon. The US presence certainly achieved that, but in what context and at what price?

It might be added that parts of China never under Japanese control also have high literacy rates and that Japan owes its writing system, and much of its high culture, to China.

When quizzed about the wild-eyed revisionist history presented at Yasukuni, (US started the war, Kamikaze bombers are real heroes, the Tokyo trials a sham, etc), Mr. Aso said, “The museum isn’t glorifying war, it’s just conveying how it was at the time.” Even Mr. Koizumi had the sense to hedge that one a bit, saying he didn’t support the view of history presented at Yasukuni.

A political rival to Mr. Koizumi and now his possible successor, Mr. Aso is so hard-core at times that he makes Mr. Koizumi, the man who appointed him, look like the consummate diplomat in comparison.

And maybe that’s the point of the appointment.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Philip J Cunningham is a free-lance writer and political commentator.*