

## Right side up

### A powerful if little-reported group claims it can restore the pre-war order

Jun 6th 2015 TOKYO

IT IS only 18 years old, and its name is innocuous—Nippon Kaigi simply means “Japan Conference”. Yet as one of Japan’s most powerful lobby groups it has a shopping list of nationalist, indeed blatantly revisionist, causes: applaud Japan’s wartime “liberation” of East Asia from Western colonialism; rebuild the armed forces; inculcate patriotism among students brainwashed by left-wing teachers; and revere the emperor as he was worshipped in the good old days before the war. Far from crediting America’s post-war occupation for bringing democracy, Nippon Kaigi’s supporters say that the occupation, and the liberal constitution that sprang from it, has emasculated Japan. Oddly, the group receives little attention from the media in Japan, despite its strong and growing influence at the heart of government.

Nippon Kaigi has backroom clout, with over 280 local chapters, 38,000 fee-paying members and a network that reaches deep into the political establishment. A former chief justice was its last chairman. About a third of the Diet (parliament) are members of the group’s parliamentary league, as are over half of the 19-strong cabinet of Shinzo Abe, the prime minister. Mr Abe is the group’s “special adviser”.

Its firepower is dedicated to making Japan a “normal country”, says Yoshiko Sakurai, a leading supporter. Education must water down imported notions of Western rights and stress duties to the state and the emperor. The group says that the nation should rearm, stoutly defend disputed territories against China and scrap the constitution of 1946 which renounces war as a means for settling disputes. It says its aim is to reflect Japan’s “true, original characteristics”.

Nippon Kaigi has a formidable ability to mobilise. A decade ago it collected 3.6m signatures demanding reforms to the education law making it compulsory to teach children patriotism. Enacting a law with this requirement was one of the

few things that Mr Abe accomplished in his first, inglorious term as prime minister from 2006 to 2007. Its members have consistently campaigned against anything that shows Japan's wartime aggression in a bad light—bombarding exhibitions on war crimes, for example, with petitions and phone calls.

Most of the group's current energies are aimed at getting signatories—10m is the target—calling for a national referendum on revising the constitution. It wants the removal of the pacifist section, Article 9, and supposedly traditional family values to be enshrined in it. A draft of a new constitution drawn up by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2012 reflects much of Nippon Kaigi's agenda. Ms Sakurai is one of the campaign's figureheads. This is a recognition by Nippon Kaigi, says Tomomi Yamaguchi at Montana State University, that changing the attitudes of women, many of whom admire Japan's long-standing pacifism, will be crucial.

Nippon Kaigi gives nationalists in China and South Korea an excuse to claim that Japanese militarism is on the rise again. It wants Mr Abe to continue to visit Tokyo's Yasukuni shrine, which deifies Japan's war dead, including those who led the nation to war in 1931-45 with disastrous consequences not just for Asia but for Japan itself. It also rejects what its supporters call Japan's apology diplomacy. Nippon Kaigi is lobbying for Japan's admissions of war guilt to be reversed this year, the 70th anniversary of the country's surrender.

A closely allied group is the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership. From the late 19th century Shinto, Japan's oldest religion, was reinvented as a tool of state, serving as an ideology that helped mobilise Japanese to fight wars in the emperor's name. In 2007 lobbying by the association and Nippon Kaigi helped to persuade the government to make April 29th a national holiday in honour of Hirohito, the emperor of Japan during the war.

Even opponents are impressed at how reactionaries have quietly transformed the landscape of Japanese politics. Nippon Kaigi members, however, are frustrated over what they see as the slow pace of change. One of their aims in future is to help Japan find support for their causes from abroad and "build friendship with other nations". It is possible they may achieve the opposite