The successful conclusion of the campaign against the rebel *shizoku* in the Seinan War emphatically ended the possibility of armed resistance to the government. By 1878, the last major armed insurrection against the new centralized government had been safely quelled and the Restoration leaders could look forward to moving on to, using Ōkubo Toshimichi’s phrase, “the more thorough fulfilment of the Restoration.” From thence in, other avenues of sedition and activism—either through the promotion of political organizations, the founding of an anti-government press or the carrying out of isolated acts of violence—would be the only remaining options.

Of equal significance was the fact that Satsuma, which up until the war had been the source of a considerable degree of dissent toward the central government, was finally forced to follow suit and join the rank and file. That this was accomplished by force of arms under the direction of a government that included Satsuma leaders signifies the degree to which the government had committed itself to a totally centralized form of government and, in having done so, alienated that segment of the *shizoku* population who either wanted to preserve the *shizoku* traditions practically unreconstructed or simply did not understand the administrative necessity of the seamlessly integrated nation state. Ōkubo, Kido and Itō were all well aware of what was at stake and pushed forward regardless of the potential for instability and even personal harm. Kido is said to have never recovered from the trauma of engaging his former comrades in war—and Ōkubo was to bear the mortal consequences of his government’s decisions: he was assassinated by a group of *samurai* from Kanazawa on 14 May 1878. This left a smaller coterie of 1868 leaders, including Itō Hirobumi, Inoue Kaoru and Ōkuma Shigenobu, to pick up the pieces and attempt to give
administrative and social substance to what was now still the sturdy but nonetheless relatively bare frame of government.²

There was a palpable difference in the nature of the political challenges that lay ahead; since widespread violent rebellion was no longer an option for the opponents of the government, the modes of resistance and agitation became much more subtle and complex. Moreover, the government was no longer the fledgling reform party that swept into control amid the turmoil and feverish anticipation of the Sonnō Jōi movement, but was itself now being held to account for the failure to revise the unequal treaties and the equally galling failure to keep Western influences—commercial, political and cultural—at bay.

Consequently, from 1879 the nation entered what could be described as a prolonged period of intense popular agitation against the government through the popular press and by means of organizing political associations and meetings with public speakers throughout the country. The government was to become increasingly aware that they were not the sole arbiters of the social agenda, as disaffected elements within the body politic, more often than not disaffected samurai, came to be galvanized through the popular (or populist) press.³ Over time, it became evident that Itō Hirobumi needed to develop an ideological platform to underpin their policies—for sure enough, any glaring contradictions or inconsistencies in the raison d’être of state policy would be swiftly pounced upon and used to fan urban discontent in print. The most famous association active at this time was the Aikokusha (Society of Patriots) under Itagaki Taisuke which self-consciously adopted the radical democratic theory of Rousseau, an angle guaranteed to put Itō on the spot in front of Western observers who were anxious to see signs of Japan’s political maturity⁴; alongside this was a counter-movement favoring the English model of constitutional monarchy that found an important advocate in Fukuzawa Yukichi who had a government-connected sponsor in the person of Ōkuma Shigenobu (who was later to establish the Constitutional Reform Party).⁵ For Itō’s part, he had no intention of committing himself to any Western model of representative government and, in any event, he could not claim to be well-versed enough in constitutional theory to argue substantially in favor of one model or another.⁶

Ōkuma, possibly sensing the void and an opportunity to “steal a march” over Itō, in 1881, boldly submitted a constitutional reform proposal to the Emperor that entailed, in essence, the immediate establishment of a parliamentary form of government modeled after the Westminster system. Itō was livid and the event sparked the major