4.1 Consolidating the Restoration

The ‘restored’ Emperor Mutsuhito, at 15 years of age, was hardly likely to proceed without guidance in his ‘enlightened rule’. Not surprisingly, his advisers were the samurai leaders who had supported his cause. These were mostly from Satsuma and Chōshū, with a few from other domains such as Tosa (in Shikoku) and Hizen (in Kyūshū). There were also a few court nobles such as Iwakura Tomomi among the group of advisers, mostly to add legitimacy to what was in effect the new government.

From Satsuma came Okubo Toshimichi (1830–78), Saigō Takamori (1827–77), and Matsukata Masayoshi (1835–1924). From Chōshū came Kido Kōin (1833–77), Inoue Kaoru (1835–1915), Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), and Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922). They were all young, most in their early thirties. Most of them were also originally of fairly low rank within the samurai class.

Itō Hirobumi, who was to become the dominant figure in Meiji, represented a classic ‘pauper to prince’ story. Born into a poor farmer’s family, in his early teens he was adopted (along with his father) into the family of a low-ranking samurai. For his subsequent exploits, which included the burning down of the British Legation, he was made a samurai in his own right in 1863. During Meiji he was to become prime minister on four occasions, and eventually obtained the title of ‘prince’.

These young men had dual motives. On the one hand they had a genuine nationalistic desire to do the best for their country in the face of
foreign threat. On the other, they had a desire to achieve personal success for themselves, a success they felt had been denied them under the old shōgunal regime. They were far from shackled by dedication to the old regime, but neither were they shackled by ideological commitment to a full imperial restoration in actual practice as well as name. It was simply a question of doing whatever was best for themselves and the nation. For the moment at least, carrying the authoritative banner of an imperial restoration seemed a good way to proceed. Fortunately for themselves and the nation, they had a maturity and wisdom beyond their years. Fortunately for the imperial family, Mutsuhito did as he was told.

Their first aim was to consolidate the new regime. People had been greatly alarmed by the turbulent events of the coup. A sort of mass hysteria was one response to the traumatic change occurring in their long-settled world. The public needed reassurance that stability – rather than the emperor – had been restored.

It was vital that lingering armed resistance was quickly put down. Edo was a centre of resistance by some 2,000 troops, but it was fully secured by July. The shōgunal loyalist Enomoto Takeaki (1836–1908) had fled Edo with a fleet of warships and taken them to Hokkaido, declaring it a republic and receiving a degree of recognition from America, but he was defeated in June the following year. Resistance was still to spring up in various forms for some years, but with the defeat of Enomoto order was effectively restored for the short term at least.

It was also vital that the emperor himself gave reassurance, especially about how Japan was going to deal with the foreign threat. In April 1868, just three months after being restored, he and his advisers issued the Charter Oath (of Five Articles). This promised

- public discussion of ‘all matters’;
- the participation of all classes in the administration of the country;
- freedom for all persons to pursue their preferred occupation;
- the abandoning of ‘evil customs of the past’ (unspecified);
- the seeking of knowledge throughout the world in order to strengthen the country (or more literally, ‘to strengthen the foundations of imperial rule’).

It was clear from this fifth article that the new government was planning not to confront the foreign threat but to learn from it and incorporate its strengths. The earlier xenophobic catchphrase ‘Sonnō jōi’ (‘Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians’) was soon to be replaced by more