INTRODUCTION

Mr Yoshida Shigeru, who had become Japanese Prime Minister for the second time in 1948, resigned at the end of 1954. He had wished to visit Britain and other European capitals in 1953 but the British Government had not been keen to receive a visit from Mr Yoshida at a time when Japan’s application to join the GATT was causing controversy. Sir Winston Churchill, as Prime Minister, in a minute dated 31 August 1953, disagreed: ‘I see no objection to his coming to England. I would rather have him here than in GATT.’ In fact, because of the political situation in Japan, the visit was first postponed to the early summer of 1954 and then again until October that year.

British opinion towards Japan in 1954, if not hostile, was not friendly. Memories of the maltreatment of prisoners of war still rankled and British expulsion from East Asia by Japanese forces in 1941–2 had not been forgotten. Japanese copying of British designs
aroused fears about unfair Japanese competition. The British textile industry had not yet fully recovered from the war and felt threatened by sweated labour, living in Japanese factory dormitories on low wages. All this meant that Mr Yoshida could hardly expect a warm welcome in London.

Sir Esler Dening, British Ambassador in Tokyo, in a telegram dated 12 October 1954, shortly before Mr Yoshida was due to arrive in London, suggested that the best approach might be to suggest to him that:

Any real improvement in Anglo-Japanese relations depends upon Japan’s ability to restore British confidence which was shaken by her commercial practices before the war and by the events of the war itself. The commercial practices of which we now complain merely renew the doubts of British industry, while the failure in two-and-a-half years to implement Article 16 of the Peace Treaty has the same effect upon British public opinion.

Dening was concerned that we were not proposing to ‘sugar’ our complaints and urged that British ministers should not ignore the Japanese political situation which was moving towards a serious political crisis. In his view, there was no prospect in Japan of a better government than that led by Mr Yoshida, ‘many though its faults undoubtedly are’. If Mr Yoshida returned from the United States ‘empty-handed’ that might well be the end of him. (In fact, he had to resign before the end of the year, but his visit to Britain did not make his position any worse.)

The Foreign Office’s general briefing for the visit stressed that the British objective was ‘to show Mr Yoshida as much consideration as possible in order to strengthen his position in Japan and to help towards keeping Japan aligned with the West’. The visit was a goodwill one and there was no intention of conducting any negotiations. ‘Sir E. Dening has said that the Japanese are badly in need of guidance and would like to feel that we are a helpful influence.’ Colin Crowe, then head of the Far Eastern Department in the Foreign Office, noted that Mr Yoshida’s English was not very good. A separate personality note described Mr Yoshida as ‘shrewd and jolly with aristocratic connexions and appropriate tastes’. It added that Mr Yoshida had ‘not hesitated to criticize the policies of HMG with frankness and even bitterness. But he is fundamentally well disposed towards us.’ The Japanese Ambassador Mr Matsumoto Shunichi, clearly on instructions, gave to the Foreign Office in advance of the visit a copy of the Japanese brief prepared for Mr Yoshida’s visit. This did not add anything significant to what the Foreign Office already knew.