

12 October 1984

## **DISSENT AND RESPONSIBILITY**

THE STALEMATE produced by the July election carried the seeds of one major blessing. It put an end to the virtual stalemate in government. It forced the two major parties to stop tripping each other up and to join forces in tackling the deepening economic crisis.

Success for their union is feasible precisely because the parties are agreed essentially on the measures that have to be taken.

Inevitably, there are and will be differences of opinion on specifics, even within each of the parties themselves – whether for the protection of some special interest or out of differing perceptions of the national good.

Once a decision has been taken, however, it should be implemented with all speed and authority.

It is unfortunate that these trite observations have to be repeated again and again. Even now, some members of the government (happily, it seems, a minority) appear not to have grasped that a drastic curative policy must cause inconvenience and hardship, and that specific measures will cause specific inconvenience and hardship to one or other sector of the public. No sector, moreover, can remain unaffected – except those in the lowest income brackets for whom exemptive provision must be made.

It is also inevitable that every hard decision – to cut public budgets or to reduce private spending – will have its drawbacks. It is proper that the public should be made aware of the drawbacks. But it is reprehensible that after a decision has been taken members of the government who were outvoted in debate should go out to campaign publicly against the decision.

Mr. David Levy and those of his colleagues who in cabinet opposed the economic decrees which were finally adopted by the majority are committing a political as well as moral sin in reopening the issue to the public and the world outside. It is expressly their duty, once a decision has been taken, to defend that decision, to help the public understand the reason why it was taken, even its harsh implications; and to help soften potential dissatisfactions in the public. That is what collective responsibility means – and demands.

If a minister who is not in charge of a specific policy feels strongly enough that it is a wrong policy, he has the option of resigning – and promoting his views in public. If his feelings are not quite so pressing as to make him resign, he should at least leave it to the ministers directly concerned to make public statements.

There is a third way – which is highly recommended – for dissident but responsible ministers: to tell the public that there were differences of opinion in the cabinet because these are inevitable in a democratic and free society and that now a decision has been reached, that decision is the policy of the state and all will pull together to make a success of it.

IT IS APPARENT that Mr. David Levy is publicly adopting an “oppositionist” attitude in order to improve his credentials as a defender of workers’ interests in the forthcoming Histadrut election. Histadrut Secretary-General Yisrael Kessar will no doubt feel the need

for similar propaganda. By their competition, Levy and Kessar may thus together create serious obstacles in the way of the hard-won critical united policy.

It is urgent that Mr. Shamir and, more particularly, Mr. Peres and his colleagues in the Labour Party should now exert their maximum influence to have the Histadrut elections postponed. The nation, and the government, need Histadrut elections now like a hole in the head.

IT IS SURPRISING how some of the critics have missed (or have chosen to ignore) the essential feature of the ban on luxury imports (apart from the saving of dollars).

They have made the remarkable discovery that you cannot collect customs dues on goods you do not import. They raise the loss of customs dues as an argument against the ban on luxury goods.

It would follow, in inescapable logic, that if the greatest good for the state lies in collecting customs dues (which, for luxuries, are naturally heavy), the government, far from banning luxuries, should actively encourage and promote their import.

Just what Finance Minister Yoram Aridor did in 1981.

Nihilistic criticism of the ban on car imports has gone even further. Some critics have claimed that the saving will not be \$470 million as claimed by government but a mere \$250 million – and therefore, etcetera etcetera.

Nobody, of course, knows exactly how many dollars will have been saved. Government must save wherever and whatever it can, and, no less important, it must be seen to be doing so.

No less salutary in weaning the public away from luxury or unnecessary spending are the obstacles now placed in the way of travel abroad. To succeed, this measure should reduce the number of Israeli citizens travelling from the incredible 700,000 of 1983 to a “normal” figure, like 200,000.

These measures are still a far cry from real belt-tightening. That a great deal has still to be done before the imperative of economy and restraint penetrates the consciousness of citizens as well as public figures – who are expected even to set an example – may be gleaned from the newspaper trivia of recent days.

The Israel Football Association has chosen this moment to demand an *increase* of 250 per cent (subsequently moderated to 100 per cent) in the payment by the broadcasting authority for permission to cover the Shabbat games in the *Songs and Goals* programme.

While a steep increase is being imposed on students’ fees, an increase vigorously opposed by the students – and universities threaten not to open for the new term for lack of funds, the new head of the Israeli Cultural Centre in Cairo finds the moment appropriate to *add* to his budget (as reported in *Ma’ariv*) by giving stipends to Egyptians studying Hebrew.

Seven years after Prime Minister Menachem Begin closed down the superfluous office of the prime minister in Tel Aviv, precisely now Premier Peres decides to reopen it.

The actual expenditure in each of these cases may be small; but every such display of obliviousness of the prime need of the hour militates against a climate of restraint – restraint of generosity as well as of appetite.

WHAT IS NEEDED in Israel today is a calculated programme to give detailed guidance to both public figures and private citizens so as to evolve, by specific acts and restraints, a national harmony of belt-tightening. Here, indeed, is a worthy undertaking for another of the band of unemployed and under-employed ministers “without portfolios.”

Such a minister should become, whether formally or informally, a director of economic restraint. Let his office become a clearing house for ways and means of encouraging and effecting savings in the daily occasions of every one of us – of people in public office, government, municipality, Histadrut, and equally of every private citizen.

Let him appoint a committee, not over-large from various sectors and levels of Israeli society (including high schools), which – on a voluntary basis – will organize a national competition for practical suggestions on “how to economize.”

Some economies are obvious, like saving on petrol; others are less obvious. Most people will be surprised at the many ways in which they, and their friends and neighbours, can effect savings – even without any real suffering.

Let the competition go on for four or six weeks. Radio and television, perhaps even newspapers, will serve as channels of communication. At the end, the most feasible and most effective suggestions (however many there may be) will be published as guidelines for the public. Israeli manufacturers and other public-spirited citizens will be happy to donate prizes to the successful authors.

Throughout it all, the minister and all others involved should see it as their object to popularize, to make it *fashionable*, to save, to economize, to “keep up with the Joneses” only in restraint.

This indeed, even without a minister, is good advice for all of us in the new year. Let us celebrate the discovery that there can be joy in austerity.

*See Letter to the Editor on following page*

*Readers' Letters – 11 November 1984*

**WASTE NOT – WANT NOT**

*To the Editor of The Jerusalem Post*

Sir, – I would like to express my admiration and appreciation of Shmuel Katz's articles in *The Jerusalem Post*. Furthermore, I want to thank you for trying to bring to your readers a balanced picture of the situation by publishing from time to time articles like "Dissent and Responsibility" (October 12).

I was especially impressed by Katz's proposal to give one of the many ministers without portfolio a chance to do something useful by becoming a sort of director of public restraint, with a committee to help him.

I would suggest that, among others, this committee should investigate the matter of the thousands of company cars that are plying our highways with, most of the time, only the driver inside. Has nobody heard of car pools in Israel? The committee should also investigate the matter of the over-generous fuel allowances. This fuel is bought by the government in hard currency and paid for by the companies in shekels, for the benefit of their employees.

By the way, it is a fact that people who drive cars which are not their property tend to be more careless and inconsiderate on the road, because eventual damage will be paid for by the companies. This, in my opinion has a direct bearing on the frightfully high rate of traffic accidents in Israel, which is in itself a tragic waste in more ways than one.

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