

October 2, 1992

FACTS AND FIXATIONS

A recent article by Amiel Ungar in The Jerusalem Post referred to a phenomenon in internal political relations which the Hebrew media have conveniently ignored: the assumption of politicians of the Left that it is their natural right to govern the State of Israel. In 1977, for the first time in its history, the Left was defeated in a national election. When, on the night of May 17, the first indication came through that the Likud had won, there came a startled reaction from Labor veteran Yitzhak Ben-Aharon (serving that night as a political commentator on television): "I don't accept this!" Throughout the subsequent years of Likud government, the idea persisted in Labor circles that it was all a mistake, that the Likud were somehow usurpers, that they really had no right to take decisions unacceptable to Labor.

Newcomers to Israel and members of the younger generation may be surprised to learn that throughout the 28 years of Labor rule, only one (repeat one) member of Herut was offered a diplomatic post, and that was during the brief period of "national unity," when Menachem Begin was a member of the Cabinet. Then Doctor Yosef Szofman was appointed ambassador - to Paraguay. That concept of exclusiveness has now shown its face in even uglier fashion.

The senior-ranking civil servant in the Shamir government, Yosef Ben-Aharon, director-general of the Prime Minister's Office, has been made the victim of a vicious propaganda campaign because he was "too closely identified" with the prime minister. (In Israel so far, every prime minister has appointed a personal confidant to head his office, and often to act as his special ambassador.) Ben-Aharon had assumed this post after 35 years in the Foreign Ministry, including a stint in Washington under ambassador Yitzhak Rabin. Nobody ever suggested that his distinguished record, during successive Labor governments, was flawed in the slightest degree.

The only rational explanation for Labor's attitude toward him is that they must have expected him to work against the prime minister. When Ben-Aharon retired from the Prime Minister's Office to make way for his successor, who is of course a man completely identified with Rabin, spiteful Foreign Minister Shimon Peres blocked his return to the Foreign Ministry and did not even offer him the ambassadorship to which he was surely entitled. Another and deeper manifestation of the pretentiousness of the Laborites and their supporters has been the assumption, replete with hutzpa but often amusing, of intellectual superiority, over the hoi polloi.

The 1984 election campaign in particular produced a spate of effusions in this spirit. Some were merely vulgar, like the expression used by an entertainer - tchah-tchahim (roughly, rabble); others were sophisticated, like the Israeli professor who explained in an article in an American newspaper that the gap between (the elite) Labor and its (backward) opponents could be compared to the gap between two peoples. It was surely inevitable that such propaganda should be sustained by distortions and plain untruth.

THIS spirit lives on. In a recent article in The Jerusalem Post on September 11, the Likud is denounced as having "a fixation on Greater Eretz Yisrael." This is a short phrase with at least three basic untruths, implicit or explicit. First, it conveys the impression that

a political philosophy exists in Israel for an expansion of Israel beyond the borders of Eretz Yisrael.

No such term has ever been used by the Likud or by anybody else. It is an appellation invented by the enemies of the Land of Israel Movement founded in 1967: in Hebrew, it is the movement for Eretz Yisrael Hashlema - the whole of the Land of Israel, meaning all of Western Palestine. The addition of "Greater" was aimed at delegitimizing a movement formed to resist the surrender of territory of the Jewish homeland to the twice-over Arab aggressors.

Next - a fixation, that is an idea suggesting a state of retarded mental development. The idea is not, as implied by the author of the article (Yosef Goell), a monopoly of the Likud. It is shared by probably a handsome majority of the Jewish population.

There is no doubt that many of the voters who gave the Labor Party its very thin majority did so out of dissatisfaction with the Likud's record on economic and social issues, and not because of opposition to the Land of Israel ideal. Next - the bearers of the "fixation." An outstanding feature of the Land of Israel movement was the composition of its founding leadership: most of them were famously identified with the Labor movement - like the poet Nathan Alterman, the novelist Moshe Shamir, the political philosopher Eliezer Livneh the former director-general of the Foreign Ministry, Doctor Haim Yahlil. Among its sponsors were S.Y. Agnon, Haim Hazaz, Dov Sadan; and its supporters came from right across the spectrum. Even today the ideal draws sustenance from across the board - all of course "fixated." If however a "fixation" does exist in Israeli political life, it is to be found precisely in the minds of the present government and its supporters. Their fixation is based on the assumption, in the face of all experience, that the Arabs are prepared, or can be persuaded by means of far-reaching concessions, to agree to a territorial compromise and "lasting" peace.

Ever since 1947, when the Zionist leaders agreed to the territorial compromise of the partition plan, claiming it would bring peace (and it was followed by war), and since 1967, when a second Arab aggression was repulsed and the Allon Plan for such compromise was proposed, the Arab reply has been: nothing doing. The Arabs have repeated the refrain time after time after time. Now they have reached the point of talking across a table to the Israelis - in order to assure Israel that, as the Syrian foreign minister proclaimed last Monday at the UN, "the Israelis are mistaken if they believe they can achieve peace without giving up not only the Golan to the last grain of sand, but all the territories occupied in 1967." For 25 years, the debate has continued in Israel - and the repeated proposals for territorial compromise have exacerbated the problem by sowing hope in Arab hearts that the day will come when, through pressure and weariness, the Israelis will go further and agree to withdraw into what their most famous defeatist Abba Eban described as the death trap of the Armistice Lines of 1949.

The opponents of the "compromise" policy believe that its consummation would give the Arabs conditions adequate for launching their "last-phase" war. They have no doubt that that is what the Arabs have in mind. They do not say "Don't trust the Arabs." They say "We do trust the Arabs" - to do what they have been saying all these years; and their purpose is frustrated precisely by Israel's presence opposite Damascus on the Golan and Israeli possession of the strategically vital Judea and Samaria.