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### Labour in the stocks

THE SIGNIFICANCE of Max Frankel's article in *The New York Times* last week has been devalued by a panicky opposition and by an inept government party.

On November 17, *The Jerusalem Post's* Washington correspondent, Wolf Blitzer, reported that "Opposition Labour Party leaders repeatedly urged a highly influential visiting *New York Times* editor to help bring down Prime Minister Menachem Begin's government by working towards a reduction in U.S. economic assistance to Israel."

From a reading of Max Frankel's article, it emerges that he did not mention the Labour Party specifically. How then did Wolf Blitzer, an experienced reporter, deduce that Frankel was referring to Labour Party leaders?

The fact is that he would have to be singularly incompetent to deduce otherwise. Mr. Frankel did write that "leading opposition figures now risk political oblivion by counseling sharp cuts in American non-military aid of \$800 million a year" in order to help topple the Begin government. Who, apart from members of the Labour Alignment, could be described as "leading Opposition figures" – who, moreover, "risk political oblivion?" Meir Vilner? Tewfik Toubi?

Frankel, who wrote that these people "reserved their most startling opinions for unattributable conversation" strongly indicated to *The Jerusalem Post* on the telephone afterwards "that they were top leaders, not secondary party functionaries."

While declining to name any of them, he did pointedly exonerate one of them – Mr. Peres.

The report predictably caused a shock into the Labour Party – and Mr. Gad Ya'acobi reacted immediately that "it is hard to believe that a balanced and serious Labour figure would make such a statement, which sounds not only ill-considered but unpatriotic."

True words. But did Ya'acobi thereby try to imply that Frankel was lying, or exaggerating, or that he was merely not equipped to distinguish between balanced-and-serious Labour figures and the not-so-balanced-and-serious varieties?

What was clear was that the Labour Party had a problem. Unless indeed Frankel was prevaricating or exaggerating (which nobody suggested) some of its leading figures had obviously tried, through him, to signal to the U.S. administration that if they wanted to help the Labour Party topple the Begin government, stop more Jews from settling beyond the Armistice lines of 1949, and altogether get themselves a more pliant Israeli government – now was their chance.

How did the Labour Party react? They could honourably have pressed Frankel to reveal the names of the culprits – whose personal prestige and political standing are surely less important than the good name of the party and even of Israeli democracy in general; they could carry out an intra-party inquiry; or they could try to evade the issue by drawing a red herring across the trail. They chose the last course. They launched a violent campaign – against the Likud.

Rushing to help the Labour Party befog the issue raised by Frankel were leading members of the Likud. The decent and tactically correct course for the Likud was to insist on exposure of the truth. If, as they were prepared to believe, the Labour party as such

was not involved, the individuals who were involved should face the music, and face the public with their proposals.

Instead, Justice Minister Moshe Nissim and Knesset faction leader Ronnie Milo rushed in to the attack, and snatched Max Frankel's place at the centre of the stage. The Labour Party jumped at the opportunity of a "conventional" squabble with the Likud and, by the absurd introduction of a no-confidence motion, helped to reduce the discussion of a serious problem to the level of a party dog-fight.

THE RESOLUTION of no-confidence will not spirit away the problem. This writer, like others, has repeatedly urged the institution of economic reforms – among them the reduction of the standard of living – to diminish, and in the end eliminate, Israeli dependence on U.S. financial aid. The Likud government's failure to institute such a policy is a major dereliction of its duty, bearing obvious and far-reaching implications for Israeli foreign policy, which, it so happens, may be fateful for our future.

But as long as the government is sustained by a majority in the Knesset the presumption basic to parliamentary democracy is that it is carrying out the will of the people. This applies to the totality of its policy, including the establishment of Jews in Judea and Samaria. All the opposition is entitled to do about it is to persuade a majority of the people at the next election to choose a new government. To try to call in a foreign power to interfere in this process is a subversion of democracy.

Mr. Frankel in his article quotes the opposition personalities as bemoaning the fact that they have no hope of achieving a majority because Mr. Begin is so popular. They suggest that Mr. Begin derives his support from the high standard of living he has engendered. This may indeed be one source; but this is a hazard the minority has to face in every democracy.

The Labour governments were just as guilty of encouraging voters by distributing pre-election largesse.

It is true that being a minority is not an ideal or even a happy state; but that is the elementary price we pay for all the benefits of democracy – including the chance of becoming a majority.

It is a shocking development of Labour Party frustration, with its minority status, that some of its leading members have evidently forgotten this very elementary truth.

One of its well-known university professors, Ze'ev Sternhal, admitted on Israel Radio this week that he had in fact urged in an interview in *Newsweek* magazine that the U.S. should cut off support to Israel; and he insisted that he was right – that the only way to prevent the government of Israel from spending money on the wrong things was to have the U.S. grant cut off.

He is thus patently prepared to dispense with the decision-making process of a parliamentary democracy.

If the Sternhal principle were accepted, we could then have a junta (perhaps including an American representative) to decide on what projects the nation's money *should* be spent – as well as other issues on which the majority decision does not please Mr. Sternhal.

ANOTHER INTERESTING note that has been insinuating itself subliminally into the new "doctrine" that the defeated minority in Israel is entitled to seek outside help to

“topple” the government, is that the Likud government derives its main support from the Oriental communities (Frankel, in his article, describes them as Mediterranean Jews).

The idea presumably is that the majority sustained by proletarian and unsophisticated Eastern Jews should not really be allowed to out-vote the Ashkenazi-dominated-bourgeois-socialist “quality.” This bizarre patricianship should be seen in its proper perspective.

In the early days of the state, a vast immigration of Jews from the Arab states took place. A large proportion of them, having been exposed to the educational norms of those countries, arrived in Israel illiterate or semi-illiterate, with little knowledge and no experience of democracy.

It was certainly impossible for them to form independent political judgments. Came elections, and most of them voted for Mapai, then in power. Nobody then heard arrogant and condescending evaluations of the cultural level of the Mapai constituency.

Today, an inevitably much more schooled “Eastern” community, including a second and even third generation, goes to the polls. Its members – who are far from homogeneous – are as capable as anybody else of judging the national interest. And most of them find the Likud more attractive.

The lesson should be clear. Labour’s present disarray – which is unhealthy for Israel as well, for a healthy democracy requires a healthy and honest opposition no less than good government – is due to a number of causes, most of them of its own making.

Its plight will worsen unless it stops looking for scapegoats in Israel and to foreign saviours outside – and unless it performs a complete overhaul of its own body, its methods, its personnel and, not least, its ideology.