

The False Torch

Uri Avnery

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YA'IR LAPID, THE FRESHMAN parliamentarian and Treasury Minister, has declared that from now on he will deliver all his important speeches outside the Knesset, confining his Knesset appearances to the legal minimum.

The reason: members from the opposition interrupt him. He cannot marshal his thoughts when interrupted. Since he is used to making his speeches with the help of a teleprompter, without interruptions of any kind, this bothers him.

What does that tell us about him?

During my 10 years in the Knesset, I made about a thousand speeches from the rostrum, some sort of record. It was always my fervent hope to be interrupted. The interjections enlivened the speeches, allowed me to retort, clarified points, attracted press coverage.

I was also a very frequent interrupter myself. I thoroughly enjoyed making “Zwischenrufe”, as the Germans call parliamentary interjections, saying in half a dozen words what I would otherwise have needed a whole speech to express.

This give-and-take is the essence of parliamentary debate. It tests your quickness of mind, mastery of the subject and general alertness. Without it, Knesset debates would be just a dull exercise in wordiness.

I remember one minister who would be totally derailed by interruption. It was Ariel Sharon. Interrupted in the middle of a sentence, he became flustered and had to start anew. But he was a veteran general, and generals are not accustomed to being interrupted by lesser mortals.

So here was this (relatively) young man, a journalist and TV personality, who cannot bear his thoughts—such as they are—to be interrupted.

WHAT ARE these precious thoughts that cannot stand being interrupted?

For several months now Lapid has been the center of interest in Israeli politics. And not only in Israel. Time Magazine, doggedly remaining ridiculous after anointing Binyamin Netanyahu as Israel's “King Bibi”, placed Lapid among the world's 100 most influential people. So by now we should have an inkling of what Lapid really thinks.

During his extremely successful election campaign, with the help of local pollsters and American advisors,

Lapid carefully selected a few themes and stuck to them.

There were three main promises:

First, to save the middle class, which, he maintained, had been downtrodden under previous governments.

Second, to achieve “equality of (bearing the) burden”, that is to compel ultra-orthodox youngsters to serve in the army like everybody else. Since the founding of the state, tens of thousands of these young men and women have been exempted—as have the Arab citizens, though for quite different reasons.

Third, to restart the “political process” (the term used in Israeli parlance to avoid the awful word “peace”) in order to achieve a “permanent solution” (ditto) based on two states.

As it turns out, all three promises were blatant lies.

NO ONE quite knows what the “middle class” is. But it must be assumed that they lie somewhere in the middle between the stinking rich and the abject poor. That may mean almost the entire population or at least a large part of it.

It is not easy to pin down Lapid's social-economic proposals, since he changes them all the time. The public has already grown used to the spectacle: in the morning Lapid proposes some measure to reduce the deficit (say, by the raising of tuition fees), by noon a howl of protest engulfs the government, in the evening the proposal is quietly dropped.

However, the draft budget for the current and the next year is now almost complete. The huge deficit—for which Lapid is not to blame—will be covered by—well, the middle class.

Taxes on the rich will remain minimal. Multinationals and other big companies will pay almost no taxes at all. Services for the poor will be cut. But the brunt of the burden will be borne by the middle class indirectly—value-added and other taxes will raise Israel's already very high cost-of-living even higher. Salaries for the middle class in Israel are lower than in almost all other developed countries.

It is clear by now that Lapid, though the main beneficiary of the huge social protests two years ago, is in fact, like Netanyahu, an ardent admirer of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

All this brings to mind the words of King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon: “My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions!” (Kings I, 12:14)

The tycoons already love him.

THE MOST important member of Lapid’s party, after himself, is Jacob Perry, a person who happens to be a very rich tycoon and former chief of the Shin-Bet. Just now the report of a commission he heads has been issued, concerning the army “burden”.

Ostensibly, this is a great victory for the anti-orthodox camp. At long last, the mass exemption of the orthodox youth from army service will be abolished. Except for a few “exceptional Talmud students”—about 1800 per year—they will all serve their three years like ordinary male mortals.

But look at the report under the microscope, and a quite different picture emerges. The mass induction of orthodox youths will take place in practice only in four years or more. That, in Israeli politics, is equal to eternity—at least. By that time, after the next election, Lapid and his band may already be history.

Under the plan, orthodox men will be inducted only on reaching 21, when practically all of them are already married and have at least two children. This will make their service much too expensive for the army, which doesn’t want them in the first place. All other recruits are inducted at 18.

Also, as of today, all orthodox men who are now 21 years old or older will be freed altogether from duty.

The army’s lack of enthusiasm for the whole project can well be understood. It now appears that in the much-touted “orthodox battalion” of volunteers which is currently serving, there are only a tiny number of real orthodox soldiers. In reality, their ranks are filled by other kippah-wearing specimens.

The whole thing is an exercise in deception. In practice, there is no power in Israel that could possibly compel the masses of orthodox youth to serve against their and their rabbis’ will and faith.

The only victor of the affair is Lapid’s adopted political blood-brother, Naftali Bennett. This new Minister of Economy and Religious Service, the representative of the settlers and other “national-religious” extremists, has rejected another part of the Perry report. Pupils of the religious pre-military schools, who now serve only 16 months (less than half of the time secular soldiers serve) would be compelled to serve 20 months. These “settlement yeshivot” are known as hotbeds of racism and ultra-nationalism, but their pupils don’t want to serve as long as their secular brethren. Bennett succeeded in reducing the extension to one whole month: his war-loving protégées will serve only 17 months.

This week Lapid performed a masterpiece of public relations: he threatened Netanyahu with a major cabinet crisis if his demand about a quite unimportant detail was not accepted. Netanyahu gave in and Lapid won. Hail to the victor!

SO WHAT about Lapid, the Man of Peace?

During the election campaign, he appeared to be a man of the “center-left”. His whole bearing was that of “one of us”, the secular, liberal center of the public, which is also identified with a vague desire for peace.

Lapid mouthed the appropriate vague phrases in favor of the two-state solution. But the suspicions of his adoring devotees should have been raised by his decision to open his campaign in—of all places—Ariel “University”, the flagship of the settlers. He also proclaimed that Jerusalem would never be divided.

On the morrow of the election Lapid struck his deal of unbreakable and unshakable brotherhood with Bennett, the extreme rightist. As the classic Hebrew saying goes: “Not for nothing did the sparrow go to the raven”.

This week Lapid granted an extra 50 million shekels to Ariel “University”, a huge bribe to the settlers at a time when social services are being cut to the bone. His budget does not strike a shekel from the government’s massive support for the settlements.

In an interview with the New York Times, Lapid disclosed his plan for peace: a Palestinian state with “temporary borders” (which means in practice less than half of the West Bank, leaving them with some 11% of historical Palestine.) Also, Jerusalem would remain united under Israeli control.

Mahmoud Abbas reacted almost at once: this is absolutely unacceptable. Even the untiring John Kerry could not bring the parties together on that basis.

ALL THIS has not helped Lapid. The public, including many (if not most) of his voters have been disillusioned by their hero. This early in his new political career, he already stands revealed as a shallow individual, good-looking but untrustworthy, well-spoken but insincere. The “new politics” which he promised look suspiciously like the tired old policies—or worse.

That is far more serious than the question of Lapid’s future career, or lack of it. It is of crucial importance for Israel that a new generation of activists for peace and social justice build a new force that will be able to compete in the next elections. The searing disappointment in Lapid may, unfortunately, push young people far away from politics.

This Shining Torch (the literal meaning of Ya’ir Lapid’s name) is close to being extinguished. Let’s hope that a more serious and more sincere bearer of the torch will appear in time. But not too much time.