

To the Victor, the Spoils

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IN THE DAYS following the recent Israeli elections, Ya'ir Lapid, the major winner, let it be known that he wanted to be the next Foreign Minister.

No wonder. It's the hell of a job. You can't lose, because the Foreign Minister is responsible for nothing. Serious foreign fiascos are always laid at the door of the Prime Minister, who determines foreign policy anyway. The Foreign Minister travels around the world, stays in luxury hotels with gourmet cuisine, has his picture taken in the company of royalty and presidents, appears almost daily on TV. Sheer paradise.

For someone who declares publicly that he wants to become Prime Minister soon, perhaps in a year and a half, this post is very advantageous. People see you among the world's great. You look "prime ministerial".

Moreover, no experience is needed. For Lapid, who entered politics less than a year ago, this is ideal. He has all a Foreign Minister needs: good looks and a photogenic quality. After all, he made his career on TV.

So why did he not become Foreign Minister? Why has he let himself be pushed into the Finance Ministry—a far more strenuous job, which can make or break a politician?

Simply because the Foreign Ministry has a big sign on its door: Occupied.

THE LAST Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, was, probably, the least suitable person for the job in the whole country. He is no Apollo. He has an air of brutality, shifty eyes and spare vocabulary. He is unpopular everywhere in the world except Russia and its satellites. He has been avoided throughout by most of his international colleagues. Many of them consider him an outright fascist.

But Netanyahu is afraid of Lieberman. Without Lieberman's parliamentary storm troopers, Likud has only 20 seats—just one more than Lapid. And within the joint party, Lieberman may well replace Netanyahu in the not too distant future.

Lieberman has been forced out of the Foreign Office by the law that forbids an indicted person to serve in the government. For many years now, a dark judicial cloud has been hanging over his head. Investigations followed suspicions of huge bribes. In the end, the Attorney General decided to content himself with an indictment for fraud and breach of trust: a minor diplomat turned over to Lieber-

man a secret police dossier concerning his investigation and was awarded an ambassadorship.

Netanyahu's fear of Lieberman induced him to promise that the Foreign Minister's post would remain empty until the final judgment in Lieberman's case. If acquitted, his lofty position will be waiting for him.

This may be a unique arrangement. After barring Lapid's ambition to succeed him, Lieberman declared this week triumphantly: *"Everyone knows that the Foreign Office belongs to the Israel Beitenu party!"*

THAT IS an interesting statement. It may be worthwhile pondering its implications.

How can any government office "belong" to a party?

In feudal times, the King awarded his nobles hereditary fiefs. Each nobleman was a minor king in his domain, in theory owing allegiance to the sovereign but in practice often almost independent. Are modern ministries such fiefs "belonging" to the party chiefs?

This is a question of principle. Ministers are supposed to serve the country and its citizens. In theory, the best man or woman suited for the job should be appointed. Party affiliation, of course, does play a role. The Prime Minister must construct a working coalition. But the uppermost consideration, even in a multi-party democratic republic, should be the suitability of the candidate for the particular office.

Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Though no elected Prime Minister should go to the length of Ehud Barak, who displayed an almost sadistic delight in placing each of his colleagues in the ministry he was most unsuitable for. Shlomo Ben-Ami, a gentle history professor, was put into the Ministry of Police (a.k.a. Interior Security), where he was responsible for an incident in which several Arab citizens were shot. Yossi Beilin, a genius bubbling with original political ideas, was sent to the Ministry of Justice. And so on.

I remember meeting several of the new ministers at a diplomatic reception soon after. They were all deeply embittered and their comments were of course unprintable.

But that was not the point. The point was that by appointing ministers quite unsuitable to the tasks entrusted to them, Barak did great damage to the interests of the state. You don't entrust your body to a surgeon who is really a

lawyer, nor do you entrust your money to a banker who is really a biologist.

YET THE idea of political entitlement was hovering over the whole process of forming the cabinet. The awarding of the ministries more closely resembles a dispute among thieves over the spoils than a responsible process of manning or womanning the ministries which will be responsible for the security and well-being of the nation.

The quarrel that held up the formation of the new government for several crucial days was over the Ministry of Education. Lapid wanted it for his No. 2, an orthodox (though moderate) rabbi. The incumbent, Gideon Sa'ar, desperately clung to it, organizing petitions in his favor among teachers, mayors and what not.

This could have been a legitimate fight if it had been about questions of education. For example, Sa'ar, a fanatical Likud man, has sent the pupils to religious and nationalistic sites in Greater Eretz Israel, to imbue them with proper patriotic fervor. He is also more intent on his pupils winning international capability tests than on education as such.

But nobody spoke about these subjects. It was a simple fight over entitlement. In medieval times, it might have been fought out with lances in a tournament. In these civilized days, both sides use political blackmail. Lapid won.

I AM not a great admirer of Tzipi Livni and her air of a spoilt brat. But I am happy about her appointment to the Ministry of Justice.

Her last two predecessors were intent on destroying the Supreme Court and putting an end to "judicial activism".¹ Tzipi can be relied on to buttress the Supreme Court, seen by many as "the last bastion of Israeli democracy".

Much more problematical is the appointment of Moshe Ya'alon as Minister of Defense. He inherited the job because there is just nobody around who could be appointed instead. Israelis take their defense seriously, and you cannot appoint, say, a gynecologist to this job.

"Bogy", as everybody calls him, is a former Chief of Staff of the Army, and a very undistinguished one. Indeed, when he finished the standard three years on the job, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon refused to grant him the almost automatic fourth year. Bogy was bitter and complained that he always had to wear high boots, because of the many snakes in the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. He may need them again now.

His many detractors call him a "bock"—German and Yiddish for a goat, symbolizing a lack of intelligence. He is an extreme militarist, who sees all problems through the sights of a gun. He can be sure of the allegiance of Israel's

vast army of ex-generals (or "degenerals" as I call them).

THE MOST problematical appointment of all is the choice of Uri Ariel for the crucial post of Minister of Housing.

Uri Ariel is the arch-settler. He was the founder of a settlement, a leader of the settlers' organization, the Ministry of Defense official responsible for the settlements. He was also a director of the Keren Kayemet—Jewish National Fund—a major arm of the settlement enterprise. He entered the Knesset when Rehavam Ze'evi, the leader of the extreme-extreme Right, was assassinated by a Palestinian hit squad.

Turning this Ministry over to such a person means that most of its resources will go to a frantic expansion of the settlements, each of which is a nail in the coffin of peace. Yet Lapid supported this appointment with all his new-found political clout, as part of his "brotherhood" bond with Naftali Bennett, who is now the godfather of the settler movement.

Bennet's party also gained the all-important Knesset finance committee, which is needed to funnel the funds to the settlements. It means that the settlers have gained complete control of the state.

Lapid's big election victory may yet be revealed as the biggest disaster for Israel.

The brotherhood pact between Lapid and Bennett made it possible for them to blackmail poor Netanyahu and get (almost) everything they longed for. Except the Foreign Ministry.

How will Lapid turn out as Minister of Finance? Difficult to say. Since he is totally innocent of any economic knowledge or experience, he will have to depend on the Prime Minister above and the ministry bureaucracy below. Treasury officials are a tough lot, with a thoroughly neo-liberal outlook. Lapid himself also adheres to this creed, which is called by many Israelis "swinish capitalism"—a term invented by Shimon Peres.

ONE of Lapid's main election promises was to put an end to the Old Politics, held responsible for all the ills and ugliness of our political life until now. Instead, he said, there will be the New Politics, an age of shining honesty and transparency, embodied by selfless and patriotic leaders, such as the members of his new party.

Not for nothing did he call his party There Is A Future.

Well, the Future has arrived, and it looks suspiciously like the Past. Indeed, the New Politics look very much like the Old Politics.

Very, very old. Even the ancient Romans are supposed to have said "*To the victor, the spoils!*" But then, Ya'ir Lapid doesn't know Latin.

¹This seems to be a problem in many countries nowadays. Governments want to abolish the court's power to annul anti-democratic laws.