

# Cats in a Sack

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IT IS A RATHER DISGUSTING spectacle.

The Israeli Right has won a crushing election victory. (On closer examination, the victory was not quite so crushing. Indeed, there was no victory at all. The crushing victory of Likud was achieved only at the expense of other rightist parties.)

The Rightist bloc together has not advanced at all. To form a majority coalition, it needs the party of Moshe Kahlon, the majority of whose voters are more leftist than rightist. Kahlon could easily have been persuaded to join a leftist coalition, if the leader of the Labor Party, Yitzhak Herzog, had been a more resolute personality.

Be that as it may, Binyamin Netanyahu is now busy trying to construct his government.

That's where the disgust comes in.

A FIGHT is going on. A fight of all against all. A fight without rules or limits.

Everyone wants to be a minister. Everybody in Likud and the other prospective coalition parties. Politicians galore.

And not just any minister. Ministries are not equal. Some are more prestigious, some less. One cannot compare the all-important Ministry of the Treasury (already promised to Kahlon) with the Ministry of the Environment, despised by each and all. Nor the Ministry of Education, with its thousands of employees (teachers and such) or the Ministry of Health (with its multitudes of doctors, nurses and what not) with the Ministry of Sports (hardly any employees).

There are several classes of ministries. At the top there are the Big Three—Defense, Treasury and Foreign Affairs. Defense is generally admired (“Our brave soldiers”) and gets a huge share of the state budget. Everybody and his wife (as you say in Hebrew slang) wants to be Minister of Defense.

Defense officials despise Foreign Office officials, as does the entire country. The cocktail-sippers are not real he-men (nor she-women). Yet the post of Foreign Minister is hotly desirable. He or she travels around all the time, represents the state, is photographed with the world's great. Also, last but not least, a Foreign Minister cannot fail. If foreign relations go wrong, nobody accuses the Foreign Minister. If anyone at all, it's the Prime Minister who gets

the blame.

ON THE morrow of an election, when the dust of battle clears, many dozens of politicians cast their eyes on the few ministries.

Each one of the leading candidates of the prospective coalition parties starts to send longing looks at the still empty chairs. One of the Big Three? If not, some of the desirable medium ministries? If not, at least one of the minor ones? Or at least Deputy Minister? The mouth waters.

Trouble is, Israeli law prescribes that the government can consist of no more than 18 ministries. No “ministers without portfolio”. The number of deputy ministers is also severely restricted.

Who would pass such a stupid law? I think it was Yair Lapid who, in a moment of hubris, caused the law to be passed. It is, of course, vastly popular. It saves money. Each minister, even without a portfolio, is entitled to a minimal staff, an office, a car and a chauffeur. Compared to the price of a single fighter plane, that is nothing. But for the general public it is a symbol of wastefulness. So we have this law.

How do you fit 40 aspiring politicians into 18 ministries? You don't. Either you change the law, as many now demand, or you turn away many very angry politicians, at your own risk.

You can console some of them with minor jobs, such as chair(wo)man of a Knesset committee, or ambassador. Not the same, though.

ALL THIS is human, all too human. Politicians are human beings. Most of them at least.

So why am I so disgusted?

Perhaps I should explain.

In medieval times, when an army, mainly consisting of mercenaries, conquered a town, they sacked it. Burghers were killed, women raped, but most of all, property was stolen. In a modern democratic society, politicians should not do the same to the country that elected them.

A government ministry is not spoils. True, in the US there was a saying “to the victor, the spoils”, and the winning party was expected to distribute all the government jobs in the country to its stooges. But that was long ago—last century.

A minister is in charge of some defined part of government activity. He or she makes important decisions that affect the lives of citizens. The public has the right to expect that all government offices and services be run the best way possible, by the most qualified people possible.

So why should a ministry—say the Ministry of the Environment—be run by a political nincompoop, who has no idea at all of the matter entrusted to him or her? Worse, by a political hack who doesn't give a damn, and who only wishes to pass the time without a glaring mishap, until some better ministry falls into his or her hands?

But Environment is a very important matter. It concerns the lives of people. Just now all Israel is excited over the suspicion that the many large chemical works located in the beautiful Haifa Bay area are responsible for the many cancer cases among the local children. And the minister? I don't even know who that is.

I REMEMBER a glaring example.

In 1999, Ehud Barak, then leader of the Labor Party, won a resounding election victory over Binyamin Netanyahu. When he published his list of ministers, there was an audible gasp.

With what looked like a sadistic streak, Barak appointed all the wrong people to all the wrong jobs. The gentle professor of history, Shlomo Ben-Ami, was appointed Minister of Police, where he failed miserably. Yossi Beilin, who considers himself an important statesman, was sent to the Ministry of Justice. And so on.

Now something similar may be happening. Likud's "Bogie" Ya'alon, generally considered a "bock" (from the German Bock, billy goat) will remain in office. No ruling party ever gives up the Ministry of Defense.

The choice of Kahlon as Minister of the Treasury may be sound—but it is imposed on Netanyahu, since without Kahlon he would have no government.

Avigdor Lieberman seems to have a kushan on the Foreign Ministry. (A kushan was a certificate of ownership in the good old days of the Ottoman Empire.) Though trounced by the voters in the election (his party lost most of its seats), Netanyahu insists on his remaining in his job, in which he was a catastrophe. Many foreign ministers around the world refused to meet him, considering him a near-fascist. He was proud of his friendship with Vladimir Putin, but just now Russia has promised to deliver its unsurpassed air-defense missiles to Iran, putting an end to Netanyahu's dreams of bombing Iran's nuclear sites.

This leaves nothing for Naftali Bennett, the far-right "natural ally" of Netanyahu, and at this moment the coalition builders are busy enlarging the Economy Ministry to console him. Several functions must be scraped together,

whether that is useful or not.

What about the public good? Efficient government? Well. . .

THE ROOT of the malaise is the combination of two quite different talents in our democratic system—and not only ours.

Under this system, politicians become ministers. That seems quite natural. Actually, it is not.

Politicians are supposed to be highly motivated, highly intelligent, highly talented administrators. Actually, they are not.

Contrary to accepted wisdom, politics is a profession. It has been said that it is a profession for those who have no talents. But that is not entirely true. Politicians need certain talents, but these have nothing in common with those demanded from a department chief.

A politician must be able to listen for years to endless empty speeches by party hacks, take part in endless meetings without purpose, be a member of endless committees. They must be ready to flatter people they despise, attend weddings, bar-mitzvas and funerals, delivering a mind-numbing speech at each.

Then, after reaching the top, they are suddenly required to run the Ministry of Health, without any qualifications in this area at all. That's where the proverbial dog is buried.

In the UK, they found a solution. The ministry is actually run by the civil service. The minister, often an object of silent amusement, is only in charge of procuring budgets. See the hilarious BBC TV series "Yes, Minister".

A quite different system prevails in the US. The people elect a president, and he (all have been male so far) alone appoints the ministers who frequently are not politicians at all. So he can appoint experts with proven abilities.

In Israel we combine the worst of all systems. All ministers are party hacks. They bring with them their stooges, who man (or woman) the chief positions in the ministries.

One result of this system is that different ministries belong to different parties. This makes joint planning almost impossible—apart from the fact that Israelis in general are unable to plan anything. Indeed, we are very proud of our "ability to improvise".

When he was still Minister of Agriculture, Ariel Sharon once told me: "When I want to do something for which I need only my own ministry, I can do it. When I want to do something that needs the cooperation of several ministries, I can't do it."

IF YOU fill a sack with cats, you will be accused of cruelty to animals.

But what is that compared to filling 18 ministries with politicians?