

OLMERT MOVES TO THE RIGHT

The entry of Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beteinu in to Ehud Olmert's governing coalition in Israel is evidence of a significant move to the right in Israeli politics. It also highlights Mr Olmert's personal political journey, from emulating Yitzak Rabin with his vision of new vistas in national policy towards the Palestinians to emulating Yitzak Shamir, determined grimly to hold on to what Israel has and to resist any positive change, as Nahum Barnea, a leading political commentator, suggested in Yediot Aharenot recently. There can be no doubt that the decision to invite Mr Lieberman to join the coalition is also evidence of the weakness of the Kadima-led government as a result of its unsuccessful war against Hizbullah in Lebanon last August.

The ostensible reason for the move is that Mr Lieberman brings in eleven new supporters, giving Mr Olmert a theoretical majority of 78 in the 120-seat Knesset. This reinforces Kadima against any weakness in its major coalition partner, the Labour Alignment where Amir Peretz, its leader and the defence minister, faces a protest movement within the party led by Ami Yalon. He dislikes both Mr Peretz's leadership and performance in the recent war as defence minister as well as the change in Ehud Olmert's policies, where unilateral "realignment" on the West Bank has been replaced by an intransigent refusal to concede to the Palestinians – itself a consequence both of Israel's failure to achieve its objectives in Lebanon and the worsening security situation in the West Bank. The Labour Alignment may now split as a result of the recent enlargement of the Coalition.

The decision to embrace Yisrael Beteinu does have its dangers, however, for Avigdor Lieberman, a former aide to Binyamin Netanyahu, has quite specific demands to make. He wants to annex the West Bank settlements, for example, thus ending any hope of peace. He has also proposed transferring Arab Israeli population centres to the Palestinian areas in order to avoid demographic tensions between Arab and Jew inside Israel itself. That ends any lingering hopes for Mr Olmert plans for unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank. But the dangers do not end there; Mr Lieberman also wants to end the stranglehold of the rabbinate over the social scene by introducing a form of civil marriage when rabbis refuse to let couples marry through the religious ceremony which, for Jews, is the only path towards marriage at present. That may frighten off Shas, Mr Olmert's other major coalition partner.

On the other hand, it does ensure that Mr Olmert can now muster enough votes to pass the budget, even if the Labour Alignment splits on the issue, as it seems likely to do. In that event, Mr Peretz may be forced out of the leadership; to become an easy sacrificial victim for the government's shortcomings in managing the war in Lebanon. It also highlights the government's determination to confront the challenge of constitutional reform – Israel's government system is generally accepted to be a factor for instability and President Moshe Katsav, who is currently facing charges of rape, has already set up a seventy-member commission to recommend reforms.

Mr Lieberman wants direct, American-style presidential elections, a 10 per cent voting threshold before a party may enter the Knesset and a formal constitution. Kadima have

proposed that minister should resign their Knesset seats to improve the distinction between legislature and executive, and that half the Knesset should be elected to constituencies, rather than through proportional representation, as at present. But the other reason for Mr Olmert's woes has nothing to do with the war or constitutional reform. His hands are also being tied and his political stature is being diminished because of repeated charges of corruption being levelled against him.

Now he faces an investigation into his role in the privatisation of Bank Leumi a year ago, when he was the acting finance minister. Two businessmen linked to him won a controlling interest in the bank and the State Comptroller suspects undue ministerial influence over the decision. The State Comptroller has already decided that a real estate deal in Jerusalem, in which the premier sold a house to a political supporter for a suspiciously high price, was not corrupt. Yet Mr Olmert still does not smell too sweet to Israeli voters, for his career has been dogged by accusations of this sort, even if they have never been proved. There were real estate deals in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and an appointments scandal when he was trade minister which is also being investigated. These and his recent political miscalculations may still shoot him down, whatever coalition partners he finds. And that would be just dandy for Mr Lieberman who is known to harbour prime ministerial ambitions!

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