



JERUSALEM LETTER

No. 13 - Sivan 15, 5738/June 20, 1978

THE KNESSET - ONE YEAR LATER

It is one year since the Likud government came to power. On this anniversary the press has devoted considerable space to analyzing the achievements and failures of the Begin government during its first year in office. However, the fact is that these achievements and failures have occupied the headlines of the international press throughout the year and these reviews tend to be simply a recapitulation of much that is known to attentive readers.

On the other hand, the past year's activities of the Knesset under the new regime and not so readily known, even to the intelligent reader, Menachem Begin's Herut Party, the linchpin of the Likud, came in from the cold after 29 years of opposition in the Knesset. On May 17, 1977, when the news broadcasts reported the impending Likud victory, there were few who were able to assimilate the reality very quickly. That first evening and in ensuing days there was much celebration and euphoria, but the fact is that one year later many die-hard Herut members can scarcely be said to have adjusted to the fact that they are the ruling party. Old habits die hard and just as many veteran Laborites have yet to come to grips with the idea that their hegemony has ended. Herut, even after one year, is still finding it difficult to cope with success. As an opposition party, it had long existed as a small, ideologically consistent, tightly-knit group. As the party in power, there are many who wish to join its ranks, but the old timers within Herut are suspicious and even alarmed by this prospect. Knesset member Haim Corfu was quoted in the Jerusalem Post as saying "The party is as wary of new members as Judaism is of converts. We have never had so many applicants for membership. In Jerusalem alone, there are hundreds of them every month and we interview each applicant at length to appraise his motives."

After one year it would seem that Herut as a political party is experiencing serious difficulties in maintaining its strong ideological base. Any broad-based party usually must accommodate a range of views, ideas and political variations. Herut has never been able to accommodate more than "the true ideology." It has always been, and remains, a nationalist party dedicated to "the rehabilitation of the Jewish people and the redemption of its historical homeland." These two principles of Ze'ev Jabotinsky have always been the rallying cry of Herut and it is difficult to widen or change these principles.

After one year of Likud government one can detect certain changes in the make-up and functioning of Israel's parliamentary body. Yet the Knesset does not seem to have changed as radically as might have been expected. Perhaps the most impressive change is that of the 120 members of Knesset, 52 are serving their first terms. This is certainly an impressive change given the fact that Israel has long endured an old man syndrome which has included the Knesset. In terms

of people, at least, for the first time one can speak of a new look in Israeli politics.

As one reads the record of the first year of this new Knesset it is apparent that, except for a change in the cast, the play remains much the same. Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin and Yigal Allon have more free time and can be seen sitting in the Knesset members dining room, chatting with friends, while on the other side, Menachem Begin, Simha Erlich, and Moshe Arens are besieged by petitioners, advisers and camp followers.

It would seem in fact that Knesset politics are stronger than party politics. The ruling party with its coalition government treats the Knesset with the same condescension as previous governments. In terms of actual work, this Knesset much like previous ones has found it difficult to get under way. In general, the first year of every Knesset has been slow. This Knesset during its first year passed 60 new laws. Interestingly enough this is the exact same number of laws as passed by its predecessor, the Seventh Knesset. Most observers agree that for the most part these laws have been of minor importance. The single significant piece of legislation passed by the Knesset this year was The Free High School Education Act initiated by Minister of Education Zevulun Hammer. In addition there were several pieces of legislation of interest initiated by individual Knesset members such as that of M.K. Abramovitz restricting missionary activity, or that of Sara Stern-Katan suggesting changes in the observance of Holocaust and Remembrance Days, and several bills initiated by Yitzhak Yitzhaki relating to educational matters. However, in general this first year of the Eighth Knesset has been relatively dull. The exciting events in the one year life-span of this Knesset do not relate to parliamentary or legislative matters. Without a doubt the dramatic events in this Knesset concerned the appearance of President Sadat before the body last November and more recently the excitement engendered by the election of a new president of the State of Israel.

With the realignment of forces within the Knesset it is interesting to note that the Alignment has found it difficult to assume its new role as the leading opposition party. During this first year 1,264 parliamentary questions were asked in the Knesset, most of them by members of the opposition. It should be noted that most of these questions have been answered by the coalition government, which does represent greater efficiency than in previous Knesset sessions. Moreover, the Alignment filed 149 urgent motions, of which 117 were tabled to various Knesset committees. Three motions of no confidence against the government were offered, all of which were defeated.

Despite Begin's promises and good intentions, this Eighth Knesset has not improved at all in terms of the attendance of its members at plenum sessions. Most Knesset sessions are still characterized by virtually an empty chamber with rarely more than one or two ministers in attendance. The Prime Minister has attempted to the best of his ability to serve as an example to his colleagues and does frequent the chamber; however, more often than not he is alone at the government table. The simple fact is that the other ministers of the government do not enjoy being in the Knesset building, inasmuch as only 5 of them have office space there. All the others have to find places in the Knesset members dining room where they are constantly besieged by petitioners, well-wishers and hangers-on.

The summer session of the Knesset has recently begun. There will be an attempt to complete the legislation concerning human and civil rights. The government is also very interested in passing legislation establishing a national health insurance plan and perhaps a national pension plan. Both of these functions have been handled through the Histadrut or other bodies and it has long been a cardinal plank in the Likud platform to nationalize them. By the same token, Labor opposition to the government on this issue is likely to be very strong indeed. There is also talk of setting a minimum wage as well as some talk about instituting a five day work week. Also pending are several pieces of legislation affecting the Basic Law dealing with the judiciary and the State Comptroller. There are also several coalition promises which still remain to be redeemed by this government concerning amendment to the abortion and autopsy laws, as well as the D.M.C. demand for electoral reform, the principal condition it imposed for entering the coalition. These items indicate that the slow-starting Knesset yet may gain momentum and generate both heat and light as well during the coming months.

In sum the Herut party has experienced serious growing pains as part of the shock of finding itself in power after thirty years. The scramble for positions of power and the awakening to political realities have slowly been absorbed. The Herut party has had to contend with the fact that after so many years in the opposition they just did not have the capable and talented manpower to staff the ministries they now control. The Likud's dramatic ascent to power has resulted in internal disarray and constant bickering and sparring for positions of power. They have yet to become accustomed to their new role as supporters of the government rather than denigrators and critics.

One can expect as this Knesset enters its second year that both the government and the Herut party will begin to take hold and that as the processes of parliamentary procedure become more familiar they will begin to exert greater control and direction. One should expect to see more activity as well as legislative action during the coming weeks and months.

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