

{DECEMBER 31, 2005}

WHO NEEDS A CAMEL?

A drunkard blacks out. His companions pour cold water on him. The drunk opens one eye, licks the water and says: “I don’t know what that is, but it won’t sell!”

I was reminded of this when I read the draft of the Labor Party’s political program, which has just been presented by a committee of experts.

It has been said that a camel is a horse drafted by a committee. Leaving aside the insult to the humped animal (in Arabic, the words for camel and beauty are closely related) we can say that committees, by their very nature, are not creative bodies. There is no need to believe in God, and not even “intelligent design”, to know that no committee could draft a noble Arab horse.

The political program that Amir Peretz is being asked to adopt is no horse, and even a camel it ain’t.

The committee to draft the horse is composed of several well-known personalities: Dave Kimche, a senior Mossad veteran; Uzi Baram, a former MK from the dovish wing of Labor; Yuli Tamir, who was a member of Peace Now long ago; Avi Primor and Alon Pinkas, former Foreign Office officials. Dalia Rabin is also a member, perhaps on the assumption that being the daughter of Yitzhak Rabin confers some kind of expertise.

He who appoints a committee generally knows what its conclusion will be. This committee is composed of moderate doves, something called in up-to-date political jargon “center left”. Not too radical, God forbid. And nor is its political program.

The committee affirms that a Palestinian state must be set up – and that’s good. It comes out against further interim agreements and also against the idea of a “provisional Palestinian state” – two ideas much favored by Ariel Sharon and included in the inane “Road Map” – and that’s good, too.

It also demands a time-table for the conclusion of the negotiations. But then comes a shocking sentence: “Only if the negotiations fail, will unilateral steps be considered, as a means of last resort.”

What do these words say? They turn the whole paragraph into an ultimatum. Either

you accept our offer, or we shall realize it unilaterally. Of course, only as a last resort. But we shall decide when the time for the last resort has come. In simple words: the committee kicks Sharon's "unilateral steps" out of the front door, only to let them in through the back door.

Christians who believe in the devil know that one of his feet is a horse's hoof. Generally the devil succeeds in hiding it, but from time to time it slips out under his cape. The "last resort" is the hoof of Satan.

Moreover, the committee states that the negotiations will be held with the "elected Palestinian leadership". Nice and proper. But the committee is not satisfied with this. It also takes the opportunity to tell the Palestinians who they must elect, by adding the words "while rejecting any negotiations with Hamas". And what if the Palestinians insist on electing Hamas, of all parties, and Hamas constitutes the Palestinian leadership? In this case, will there be no negotiations, so that we turn at once to "unilateral steps" a la Sharon?

This is clearly a silly approach. The rejection of Hamas is based on the organization's refusal to recognize the very existence of Israel and its call for its destruction. But if it is ready to enter into negotiations with the elected government of Israel in order to arrive at a permanent peace, it does already recognize it in practice. More than that, the Palestinian authority derives its status from the Oslo agreement, which is based on the official mutual recognition between the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. When Hamas takes part in the Palestinian elections, its very participation constitutes effective recognition of Israel.

All this reminds one of bygone days, when the Labor governments rejected any negotiations with the PLO, using the very same arguments. Have they learned nothing and forgotten nothing?

Further: Jerusalem. Like Sharon, like Netanyahu, the program states that "Jerusalem is the united capital of the State of Israel".

True, the committee does agree to re-examine the municipal map and exclude several villages and neighborhoods surrounding the city. This means, probably, villages like Abu-Dis and Azarieh, which never belonged to Jerusalem until their annexation after the Six-day war. Fine as far as it goes. But the program tacitly supports the annexation of all the Arab East Jerusalem neighborhoods, such as the Old City, the Temple Mount, Abu-Tur, Sheik Jerakh and much more. Altogether, it gives the Palestinians far less than the Clinton formula ("what is Jewish to the Israelis, what is Arab to the Palestinians").

The story is told that Napoleon once entered a German town and was not received with the customary 101 cannon salute. When the mayor was called to explain this

insult, he produced a long list and started reading: “Number one, we have no cannons.” Napoleon interrupted him: “That’s enough. No need to read any further.”

This can also be said about a program that includes the annexation of East Jerusalem. No need for further paragraphs. No Palestinian – or Muslim – could agree – neither Fatah nor Hamas, neither today nor in a hundred years. One can turn at once to the “last resort”.

Leaving Jerusalem, we can move straight to Hong Kong. There, in the Chinese island, the committee found a truly original inspiration.

Some 107 years ago, in the heyday of British imperialism, when China was down and out, the captains of the Empire wanted to take possession of Hong Kong, a Chinese island of great strategic value. For some reason, they did not want to annex it outright, preferring a gimmick. China was compelled to “rent” it out for 99 years, and it became a British crown colony.

Now the program proposes a similar gimmick: the Palestinian Authority will rent the “settlement blocs” to Israel for 99 years, and Israel will pay the rent in money or territory (also rented for 99 years?) And what will Israel do in the rented areas? Cover it with settlements to the last centimeter. So what will it return in 99 years?

It is hard to imagine a Palestinian who can distinguish between this idea and the annexation proposed by Sharon. Or a Palestinian who cares much what will happen in 99 years time.

What are all these gimmicks for?

I am not so naïve as not to know the purpose of election platforms. They are there to attract votes and are forgotten the day after. But these particular tricks are no good even for this purpose.

The committee obviously thinks that Peretz’s real program would frighten the voters. So it submits a cut-down, laundered version, in the hope of appealing to people in the mythical center, who are now eyeing Sharon. It is also clear that the formulators wanted to stitch together a program that would enable the Labor Party in due course to enter into a coalition headed by Sharon. But that is a miscalculation.

These elections are not a choice between programs, but a choice between three personalities: Sharon, Netanyahu and Peretz. Nobody cares much who is the candidate number 9 or 13 on the Labor, Likud or Kadima list. They will vote for a leader who looks to them like a man who can lead the state. In this respect, Sharon stands head and shoulders above the others.

The Labor election campaign must convince the public that Amir Peretz is a leader who is consistent, sure of himself, and, more than anything else, who is not afraid at all, a Prime Minister who does not cave in, who knows what he wants, who has clear

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solutions for all the problems. A program that is shallow, wishy-washy and stitched together in patches will not convince anyone that Peretz is the man.

No point patching together a camel. The people want a knight on horseback.