

### Analysis: From party of government to laughingstock

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An irreverent Britishism for absolute incompetence refers to someone who "couldn't organize a p\*ss-up in a brewery." Labor on Tuesday demonstrated the political equivalent: It couldn't organize a vote in a polling booth.

Trying to drag itself into the 21st century with an ultra-modern computerized process for selecting its Knesset list, it neglected the ancient imperative to check and recheck the basics - in this case, to be sure that the vaunted new system actually worked.

It didn't. And those of the party's 60,000 members who had bothered to schlep to the polling stations to express a preference for "Bujie" over "Fuad," et al, were told to go home and try again on Thursday.

Whether or not these hardy Laborites do indeed come back, the danger for Labor is that precious few will want to vote for the party when it really matters, on February 10.

Tuesday's farce marks a new low point for the erstwhile party of government - the grouping that, under one name or another, led Israel through our first three decades of statehood.

Of course, it was *only* a computer failure, and these things can happen to anybody, but they happen to catastrophic effect to those who don't prepare effectively and don't have a fallback plan. If Labor is incapable of so much as running its internal elections, the Israeli electorate might henceforth be forgiven for thinking, how credibly should we take its claims to be capable of running the country?

Political parties have no divine right to eternal life. And in our ultra-volatile political system, they rise and fall like hemlines.

Even relative heavyweights can disappear in seconds: witness Shinui's evaporation, on the eve of the last elections, when its internal vote in January 2006 placed the "wrong" candidate (the long forgotten Rob Lowenthal) in the No. 2 spot (instead of veteran MK Avraham Poraz). A 15-seat Knesset party was doomed by dawn.

The irony of Labor's plight is that it does actually still stand for something - not only in its socioeconomic thinking, but also in its attitude to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Party Chairman Ehud Barak is commonly castigated by alienated supporters for being too hawkish on the peace front, and is understandably upbraided by them for failing to tackle the illegal settlement outposts. But having been badly burned by the intransigent Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000, Barak has displayed a certain responsibility in his cautious approach to dealings with Mahmoud Abbas and his disinclination to out-compromise Kadima Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

A more adept leader might have been able to position Labor as the only dependable alternative to Binyamin Netanyahu's resurgent Likud, and to have depicted Kadima as a motley crew of opportunistic unreliaables, lost without their founder Ariel Sharon, stained by corruption, headed by a political naif, and unworthy of anyone's vote.

Instead, Labor must now battle the growing conventional wisdom that it is in terminal free fall - conventional wisdom that will doubtless inform another slew of still-worse opinion polls later this week, potentially accelerating a self-fulfilling slide into oblivion.

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