

Leader/Editorial

The Daily Star, 27 July 1998

Hall of Fame or...

The choice of an occupant for Baabda palace has always been subject to

external influences, be they Arab, European or American.

President Elias

Hrawi's successor will be no exception. However, there are differences this

time, especially in regard to the Syrian role.

For its own reasons and as part of its efforts to be fully accepted back

into international society, Damascus is taking soundings and listening to

suggestions about what sort of person other people - including the Lebanese

themselves - want as a president. That doesn't, of course, necessarily mean

that the Syrians will take any notice. However, if the Lebanese are to move

towards regaining control over their own affairs, it is important that they

enter this consultation.

Despite Christian assertions otherwise, the post-Taif presidency has not

been reduced to the position of impotent figurehead, as explained by Chibli

Mallat on this page. However, what did change is that for the

system

envisaged in Taif to function it is essential to have a close working

relationship between president - as a policy-making chairman - and prime

minister - as chief executive officer.

This necessary harmony didn't happen between Hrawi and Rafik Hariri, which

contributed to periodic bouts of political paralysis, a leadership often

pulling in different directions even though the two men agreed on

fundamental policies and a cabinet resembling in part a pack of naughty

schoolboys determined to defy all norms and authority on the increasingly

fractious opportunities presented to them. It's no way to run a country.

Hariri is rumoured to want to replace the lot of them with a bunch of technocrats. Not even a cigar for that idea. Experts give advice. Countries

are run by politicians.

The fault at the top lies as much with Hariri as it does with Hrawi. The

prime minister has still not come to terms with the difference between the

allowed autocratic and secretive rule of a private company and the

governing of a nation.

His latest threat to hand over the reins to someone else is a

smokescreen

and a manoeuvre to win for himself not more power but less accountability.

We will move forward when politicians recognise that their role in life is

to give a lead to the country and not a lift to their egos.

A strong working partnership between president and premier would

undoubtedly have a calming effect on the recalcitrant schoolboys. The

narrow, blinkered behaviour of some members of the cabinet is scarcely

surprising given the latitude and licence they have been allowed.

And the whole cabinet must realise that it has joint responsibility and

that it is - quite rightly - both jointly and individually answerable to

parliament, the elected voice of the people.

Nor is speaker Nabih Berri immune from bearing some responsibility for our

perpetual chaos. As head of the people's watchdog, the speaker's job is to

impose transparency and accountability on the government, not to act as

some third force.

Much of the post-war chaos is both understandable and almost forgivable.

Building from a base point below zero is a herculean task for anyone. But

the extended honeymoon has gone. The tolerance for quietly

watching

politicians play games with other people's lives has evaporated.

With a new president will come a new government and a new opportunity to

give the people the leadership they deserve.

If it's wasted again, it's not the Hall of Fame that will be featuring the

present crowd but the Chamber of Horrors.