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ROOM TO COOPERATE

THOSE INNOCENT souls who demand that a government of national unity be established in Israel had better resign themselves to the fact that this, in the present circumstances, is impossible. Unless, that is, the Alignment sees the light and abandons its opposition to the settlement of Jews throughout western Eretz Yisrael, or the Likud abandons its principles and agrees to “freeze” its settlement policy.

There are, however, on the home front crucial, even burning, issues on which, given a proper concern for the public weal, it is feasible for the major parties to cooperate, whatever the result of the approaching elections.

One of them is economic policy. If mutual recriminations are set aside, two facts stand out in stark relief. The first is the absence of any fundamental difference in the promises of the two parties. What differences indeed could there be? They must aim at reducing the rate of inflation, at narrowing the gap in the balance of payments and at keeping unemployment at a minimum; and there is no magic formula for achieving these sometimes clashing purposes.

Alignment spokesmen have, it is true, been trying hard to convey the impression of significant differences (and of “instant” solutions). They claim they will save large amounts of money by “freezing” the settlements in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district. This dramatic assertion – endlessly repeated – is quite without foundation.

Expenditures on these settlements are relatively insignificant in the total national budget. According to the calculation of Meron Benvenisti, a pronounced opponent of the government’s settlement policy, they probably amount to about one-half of one per cent. Also, part of the money spent today would be spent by any government for infrastructure. Moreover, the Alignment’s own policy of settlement beyond the Green Line would, after all, also cost money.

(Shimon Peres, in an interview last week, claimed that most of the 40,000 Jews living in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district were settled there by the Alignment government. So far no Alignment spokesmen have suggested that “their” K kosher communities would be frozen.)

Nor do they take into account the reality that housing suspended beyond the Green Line would have to be provided elsewhere – and, incidentally, elsewhere costs are higher.

In a nutshell, if the Alignment leaders are honestly against further settlement in Judea and Samaria on political ground, they should not confuse the issue by pretending that they are moved by authentic economic concerns.

THE OTHER Alignment claim to a promised saving is more transparently hollow: withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon.

An Alignment government would face precisely the same dilemma in Lebanon as the Likud. Unless it is prepared demonstratively to expose Galilee to the threat of attack – and is able moreover to persuade the population in Galilee that the threat is not real – it

will not be able to withdraw the IDF any earlier than the Likud government. Certainly no significant difference is in the offing.

Indeed the constant harping by Alignment spokesmen on these panaceas only emphasizes the truth – sad though it may be – that they have nothing to offer that is substantially different from Yigal Cohen-Orgad's policy. It should not be difficult for them to admit this. After all, the leaders of both parties ask for advice from the same professors of economics.

THE SECOND FACT that stands out in the current debate is the absence of any reference by either party to one of the central elements in Israel's economic plight. After all, the root cause of our ills is that we are, as a people, consuming more than we are earning. We are producing too little for the standard of living we maintain. The need for all but those in the lowest income brackets to reduce their standard of living and to live within their means, is obvious, but no less urgent is the need to increase Israel's productivity.

The Israeli worker and entrepreneur are no less intelligent or nimble than their European counterparts; but Israeli productivity lags well behind that of Europe. There seems to be no reason why this should be so.

A high national priority should be accorded by the government – whichever party is in power – to a comprehensive and energetic study of the causes of inadequate productivity (by and large) in Israel, and to the application of appropriate remedies. An improvement of 10 per cent in Israel's performance could have far-reaching effects on our economic condition.

BOTH MAJOR parties also neglect the endemic problem of strikes in essential services. Neither party should be allowed to dodge the issue.

Several years ago I asked a leading and highly articulate personality in the Labour Party to explain to me why the party objected to the introduction of compulsory national arbitration in labour disputes, which cause so much suffering, damage to the economy and tension and conflict within Israeli society. Why, I asked, are Israeli judges, famously so capable of deciding fairly between litigants on every other subject under the sun, deemed inadequate to decide precisely on the relatively simple problems raised in labour disputes. How, I asked, could these strikes be considered a given in society or even socially desirable. Obviously they contain a "hijacking element" with groups saying that if their demands are not met, then the nation's children will get no schooling or the people no radio and television or no air service or having only the dangerously ill receive medical attention.

My highly intelligent Labour Party friend replied in all sincerity: "I haven't got an answer." That is the simple truth.

Yet it is the Labour Party controlling the Histadrut, which has played a major role in the Likud's failure to introduce legislation – which it has promised for years – for arbitration in the essential services. The Likud has culpably allowed its fear of obstruction, threatened by the Histadrut, sponsored by the Labour Party, to overcome its obligations and the logic of increasingly grave circumstances.

Its fears are moreover unjustified. Given a rational explanation of the feasibility, the fairness and the national need of a system of arbitration, which would eliminate the

urge to strike, the vast majority of wage-earners in the services involved (themselves, after all, innocent victims of the various forms of punishment inflicted by the strikes) will welcome such a peaceful and rational solution to their own problems.

There is every reason, in terms of common sense and for social justice and the national interest, why the major parties should get together to evolve an agreed on formula for a system of compulsory arbitration.

ANOTHER AREA of growing social disorder is the relations between a segment of the Orthodox community and secular Jews. If we are not all to become the victims of an escalation of the problem in all its aspects, it is essential that the two major parties agree on a common policy – to combat violence and provocation, and to prevent extortion.

In the first place it should be understood that violence will be treated with the full severity the law permits – whether its perpetrators are unruly youngsters or learned adults who should know better. On the other hand, the government should ensure that the status quo compromise agreed upon at the establishment of the state be honoured by secular and Orthodox alike – and by the government itself. It is the only available anchor for mutual tolerance. The opposition can play a significant part in educating the public for its maintenance.

Most important, only an understanding between the major parties can put an end to the practice of making concessions outrageous in principle and dangerous to the social fabric, to a small party in return for support of a coalition with a shaky majority. Proposals for legislation should be debated on their merits and decided on by regular parliamentary procedure. Religious questions should be put to a free vote. Persuasion, not a price paid by the government nor a promise of price to be paid by opposition, should govern the results of such a debate.

There are other domestic areas as well that cry out for re-evaluation by the large parties. Surely their leaders must realize that precisely because of the overheated atmosphere in our society, they should, without surrendering their political principles, seek out those areas and cooperate to remove them for the areas of legitimate partisan confrontation.