

## The System's Broken and Needs Fixing

by

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A few days ago, former Meretz MK Naomi Chazan translated the expression “if it ain't broke, don't fix it” to express her opinion that Israel's system of government is functioning rather well. She believes that only minor modifications are needed for improving the system.

Differences in opinion regarding various forms of government arise from inherent contradictions between features that most people actually desire. For example: providing representation for as many groups and ideas as possible versus providing leaders with the ability to manage the country and define a national perspective; providing a mechanism enabling a change of political direction at any time of dissatisfaction through no-confidence motions as opposed to providing periods of stable government that facilitate long-term strategic planning and sufficient time for policy implementation.

Israel's political system is situated on the far end of the representation spectrum, allowing a very large range of opinions to be represented in the Knesset, a fact that makes it possible to understand Chazan's stance on the non-necessity of governmental reform. But this severely restricts our ability to chart a national direction. One could ask, what exactly is a “national direction”? On the other hand, in the absence of such a “national direction”, why exactly do we live here and how will it be possible to explain to our children that their home in the future should also be here?

This is a nation of immigrants in which many today completely oppose the melting pot concept – a notion that is in fact becoming less and less politically correct here over the years. As a native-born Israeli with a mother born in Iraq and a father born in Lithuania, that is married to a woman born in Iran and a father to children born in the United States, I can personally attest that the wealth of cultures enriched my life and provided a feeling of belonging to something much bigger and stronger than personal family ties. That is why the more “in” multi-culturalism is, in my opinion, nothing more than a stepping stone toward the social melting pot that is reflected in our common national path – a path that needs to receive considerably more weight in the country's system of government.

While there is a need to fully uphold each citizen's civil rights, it is not possible to provide a complete representation of differing individual opinions without impairing the ability to govern. That is why each system of government reflects its respective society's compromise between the two. In a country like ours, which is facing real and immediate existential problems that are both external and internal, we do not have the luxury of compromising the ability to govern to the extent that we have thus far.

There are those who believe that it is possible to improve governance by raising the minimum vote threshold for entry into the Knesset. Underlying this approach is the anticipation that just two large parties, with one or two smaller ones, would remain following such a change. Without opening up the Pandora's box of whether the small party would be ultra-orthodox or Arab – or one of each – it is worthwhile to fully understand the implication of bestowing the ability to “crown the leader” upon a minority party which would be able to extract almost any compensation that it wanted in return for giving the helm of government to one of the large parties.

A complete separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches is essential for increasing the balance between the two. What is referred to in Israel as the “Norwegian Law” (requiring ministers who are MK’s to resign from the Knesset) is widely considered here to be the most effective means for delivering the desired outcome. But this solution, just like the proposed increase in the minimum vote threshold, is no more than just another ad hoc patch on our system of government. Separation of powers is a necessary, but insufficient, condition since we will still remain with party heads as cabinet ministers who often lack any professional understanding or personal interest in their respective ministries’ areas of responsibility.

The system of government that we so urgently require must be based on four principles that deal directly with the root causes of the main problems. The election of each MK and of the president by their constituencies rather than the party would facilitate direct accountability to the voters. Fixed terms of office for MK’s and the president would provide stability. MK’s would not be able to serve as ministers, a provision that would increase their independence in overseeing the executive branch’s activities and in counter-balancing its power. Cabinet ministers working for the president, who are experts in their field, and who would not be MKs, would be able to work together with the leader instead of against him as is too common today.

The primary lesson to be learned from what has transpired in this country over the past three decades is that our system of government is dysfunctional to the core. Naomi Chazan, it is definitely broken and needs to be fixed. It yields disasters accompanied by non-accountability and an increasing paralysis in our national ability to deal with ongoing problems. There is no alternative to a comprehensive and immediate overhaul of the system before the existential crises that we face pass the point of no return and become unsolvable – with all that this implies regarding the collective destiny of this people with such varying opinions.