

Convergence to a Common Toolbox

by

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Two critical issues stood at the center of our recent elections: reducing the size of the country and reducing the size of the population living in poverty. A Gordian knot ties these two issues together, and not just from the standpoint of a new budget reprioritization.

Public agreement for the “convergence plan” peaks at just 60 MKs (from Kadima, Labor, the Pensioners and Meretz) – and even this depends on Marina Solodkin, and others like her, to get up on the right side of the bed on the day of the vote. Shas has already received an exemption. In light of relative birth rates within Israel, the nationalist-religious camp is growing steadily, even taking into account its setback last year. It is entirely unclear how many years we have left in which a majority of MKs can be mustered into agreeing to converge into a country with a solid plurality that will enable Israel to preserve its Jewish and democratic character.

On the second front, over a third of the country’s families live below the poverty line according to their gross incomes, i.e. before the tax and welfare systems begin to reallocate the income pie. This is the true level of poverty that must be dealt with, a level that is hidden behind the scenes and rarely makes an appearance in our public debate – a level that has been steadily rising since the seventies. But surprisingly enough, the most important instrument for fighting poverty and changing its long-run trend was not discussed or even mentioned in the coalition agreements. Instead of concentrating on substance, it was deemed much more important to haggle over the few dozen shekels that could be added, and at what rate, to a minimum wage that is not even enforced in any event.

From all the slogans and clichés, the word “education” has long ago lost its meaning. During the coalition negotiations, the big battle was over who would become education minister – and not one word on the real crux of the issue: the educational toolbox.

There are many different lifestyles in Israel, and our widely-varied educational systems reflect this. However, there is but one economic market in which all must compete, be they Americans, Europeans, Chinese and Indians – or secular, religious, ultra-orthodox and Arab citizens of Israel. Economic survival in this competitive global reality requires that everyone be equipped with a basic toolbox that contains core subjects such as mathematics, science, Hebrew, English, civics, history and computers.

National living standards are increasingly determined by the level of the toolboxes with which residents are provided. These same toolboxes also determine the democratic strength and moral fiber of nations. The government’s role is to provide all residents with the highest quality infrastructures possible that will enable a maximization of the national potential. The educational toolbox – a common core curriculum for all the children of Israel – is Israeli society’s most basic infrastructure. At a time when the scholastic achievements of these children are consistently the lowest in the West, the People of the Book need to recalibrate their internal compass and adopt a higher quality core curriculum than is common abroad.

This is only part of the solution. It is also time for the State of Israel to regain its sovereignty and mandate that every school in each of our educational systems and in each of the towns be required to teach the core curriculum in its entirety without the possibility to pick and

choose – otherwise the school will be ineligible to receive an operating license or a single shekel to finance its activities. School curriculums that reflect Israel's assorted lifestyles can supplement the common core, but not replace it. While individuals have the right to choose their personal lifestyles, they do not have the right to deprive their children from acquiring the basic toolbox that will enable them to make a decent living and be free from dependence on others.

Sounds unrealistic? It is no coincidence that Kadima and Labor stayed away from this hot potato. These experienced politicians with both feet on the ground know perfectly well – in theory – what is possible to implement and what is not. Just one small problem. In light of the birthrates and the living standards common to those segments of the population that oppose adoption of a common toolbox, how much more realistic is it to assume that this country will continue to exist in this neighborhood when most of its inhabitants will not possess the tools necessary for economic and military survival. So, which policy option is really the unrealistic alternative?

It is possible that the 60 MKs who support territorial convergence to save the country also provide one of our last opportunities for ensuring that the country that they save will be able to flourish afterwards. This is our representatives' true test of leadership. They need to forget their trivial and artificial gimmicks and begin concentrating on the root problems of Israeli society in a systemic and professional manner. Otherwise, we may converge into a large Jewish majority – but one that is afflicted with a terminal illness that is still avoidable.