



# Polity without policy

**Polity** – the voters who elect the body politic, based on its proposed policies

**Policy** – what political candidates propose to do, to deal with pressing economic, social, defense and educational challenges

**WHAT HAPPENS** in democracies, when we the voters, the polity, cast our ballots without any clue about what those we are voting for plan to do? What if those we vote for have no idea themselves what they plan to do? And why are Israel and Western democracies in this pickle?

In the US, politics are stalemated by an epic battle between President Donald Trump and the Democrats over Trump’s obsession to build a border wall. In fiscal 2018, the federal government spent \$4.11 trillion, 20% of GDP. Yet Trump’s request for \$8 billion for his wall, or 0.2% of the total budget, has become the focal issue – and may again shut down the government.

Is a border wall the only problem facing the US? What about a slowing economy, growing budget deficits, growing trade deficits, failing educational system, crumbling infrastructure, aging airports, bankrupt social security system, and a host of other problems?

In Britain, the polity voted in a referendum three years ago to leave the European Union, without anyone explaining clearly (or even knowing) on what terms this would happen. “Take back control” was the slogan of the pro-leave camp. Meaning: Stop the inflow of migrants.

But what about Ireland? Trade? Jobs? Expatriates living in Europe? Europeans living in Britain? There were no answers. A narrow “yes” vote was based on zero policy, because none existed. Now Britain’s Parliament is in a huge mess, because there is no clear majority for any course of action whatsoever.

And Israel? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu feuds publicly with the celebrity Rotem Sela over her Instagram post. Sela is a popular TV host and star of “Beauty and the Baker,” an Israeli romantic comedy series that follows the impossible love story between a simple baker and an international supermodel.

Substance? Policies? The deficit? Gaza? Chinese investments? Haredim? Low productivity? Slowing trade? You won’t find any real discussion of those in this desert of an election campaign.

There is one major, weird exception to the “polity without policy” claim. It is the small fringe party called Zehut (Identity) headed by Moshe Feiglin. Feiglin quit the Likud in January 2015 and started his own party. Polls indicate Zehut might make the 3.25% minimum and elect four Knesset members. Why? In large part because Feiglin supports legalizing cannabis and the pro-cannabis party Aleh Yarok (Green Leaf), which ran in 2015 garnering 47,180 votes, is not running in this election. Legalizing marijuana has become a hot-button issue. So apparently many young people will vote for Zehut solely for its position on cannabis, unaware or uncaring Feiglin is far-right.

The Zehut party has a remarkably detailed platform, 220 pages worth, with policies on every imaginable issue. Of all the political parties, Zehut is the only one with a carefully reasoned set of policies, based on free markets, privacy of the individual and minimal government. But how many of those who will vote for Feiglin have even bothered to read it?

Troubled by this lack of electoral substance, and especially by the lack of concern over pressing long-term issues, I spoke with friends at TheMarker business daily. A group of journalists and I came up with an idea for a conference called Y Worries – the Economics of Future Generations, focused on the key policy issues that will face the next government, especially those related to the young. The conference was held in Tel Aviv on Tuesday, March 12. Unlike most such conferences, where gray-haired seniors predominate, this one had a lot of Generation Y speakers. The basic idea was to focus public attention on many



of the key policy issues that will face the next government.

Here are some of the main questions that were posed at the conference, which will urgently require answers and policies by the next government. TheMarker senior commentator Sami Peretz noted that Israelis work harder than the OECD average – 8% more work hours yearly – but have abysmally low output per hour. Why? What should be done? Why does Israel spend only 0.2% of GDP on vocational training, when Finland spends proportionally five times more?

On average, over half of Generation Y members, aged 21 to 37, get help from their parents, averaging \$11,000 yearly. How long will our children need our support? And why do they?

Generation Y member Avigayil Levin observed that “the younger generation has lost faith in the financial system. My generation thinks that pension funds won’t have the money to pay for our pensions, so they are living well in the present. In 2008, pension reform made pensions mandatory for everybody; people had to manage their pension investments without knowing how. When I reviewed my pension report, I found that 8,000 shekels were missing!” Levin founded a Facebook interest group, “Watching Out for Our Money.”





MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

TheMarker journalist Avi Bar-Eli raised issues related to Israel's high population density – 416 people per square km, among the highest in the world. With total fertility in Israel reaching 3.1 children per woman, the highest in the West, Israel will need 55,000 new housing units annually. Who will build them? And with such high density, how will we get to and from work?

From 2000 to 2018, the number of vehicles on Israeli roads grew by 80%, while roads themselves expanded by 20%. Train ridership grew 80% from 2010, but the railroad capacity could not keep up. Why?

Young social activist Daphni Leef focused on values. What core values will drive Israel in the coming 50 years? Some people race ahead, others are left behind; why are we ignoring those who pay the price of social trends? Gaps are growing. We need vision, we need ethics, she said, as we transition to a new era in the next 30 years.

Aharon Aharon, head of the Israel Innovation Authority (formerly the Chief Scientist's Office) spoke about Israel's vibrant hi-tech sector. He quoted an expert who observed that "everything [in future] that cannot be automated or digitized will become extremely valuable." What is Israel doing to prepare its youth for this future? He noted that 65% of all those now in Grade 1 will be employed in

occupations that do not yet exist.

Later, TheMarker columnist Meirav Arlosoroff noted that most highly skilled university graduates in science and engineering end up in hi-tech. What about skills needed in non-hi-tech? They are seriously lacking.

Yuli Hillel was elected as Vice Chair of the Israeli Students Association in February; she is 29. She noted that the No. 1 issue for young people is the high cost of living. We demand that the finances for our children should be run properly, she said.

Keynote speaker Prof. Larry Kotlikoff (see "Waging war on our children," *The Jerusalem Report*, November 1, 2018) explained why governments are placing huge debt burdens on future generations ("generational theft"). He recounted how Norway, partly through his advice, has socked away \$1 trillion, or over \$200,000 for each Norwegian citizen, by saving and setting aside every oil and gas dollar it earns.

What happens when our young people lose trust in the corrupt myopic politics of their parents and give up on the system? Take for instance the Commission for Future Generations, established in Israel in 2001. The commissioner was empowered to examine any parliamentary legislation where it judged potential harm of future generations and to express opinions during legislative committee deliberations or as an attachment

Two men dressed up as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump walk through the streets of Jerusalem for Purim, which was celebrated in the capital on March 22

to bills. This was a great idea. But narrow factional politics abolished the commission in 2006. That was a huge mistake.

Israel and all Western democracies face a dilemma. An informed electorate is essential to good democratic practice. Citizens need to know what they are voting for and why they are voting for this. What happens when those running for election choose not to reveal their policies, either because such policies don't exist or because they think to do so will lose voters? Their strategic advisers counsel them to do this, noting that people cannot oppose a policy that does not exist! And what happens when we, the voters, let them get away with it because we are apathetic?

What happens is this – we have an election like that of April 9, without substance, driven by empty mud-slinging and vapid labels. If this is what we are willing to accept, perhaps we deserve it. ■

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