

NO GREAT DEBATE IN ISRAELI ELECTIONS

A few months ago, all the pundits were predicting that the most strenuous national debate in Israel's history would take place during the course of the election.

But, travelling around Israel last week, one was struck with the fact that the election campaign is being conducted without any substantive national debate. The issues are boiling beneath the surface, but the politicians are not yet talking about them.

The reason for the silence is clear enough. The most urgent issue in the minds of the Israeli electorate is the economy. Whichever group of politicians wins the election, they are going to have to take some drastic action on the economy, and they do not think they will win votes by talking about it.

Haim Ben-Shahar, Professor of Economics and former president of Tel Aviv University, explained some of the problems to a small group of San Francisco and Los Angeles Jews. This was at a meeting in Tel Aviv on the West Coast Endeavor, an effort to create more direct communications between the Israelis and American Jews on a local level.

Ben-Shahar pointed out that, in the last several years, Israeli consumption has increased twice as fast as the general national product. In other words, Israelis were personally spending more than the country was making. Or, to put it in more dramatic terms, in the last ten years, Israelis received a 38 per cent increase in wages, while Israeli output increased by only 6 per cent.

That is obviously a prescription for disaster. You can stand outside a Bank Leumi office and watch the value of the shekel drop in front of your eyes. There may have to be price control, wage control, dollarization -- but more than that, a drastic cut in government spending, including subsidies and government employment. Whatever the program, it will be strong medicine, affecting the standard of living, and the politicians do not want to talk about it.

Nor has a great national debate on foreign affairs emerged. What is the difference on that subject between the two major parties? "Mainly a matter of style" was the usual answer on the street last week. There will be an inevitable pull-back from Lebanon, only a little more swiftly and fully by Labor than by Likud. Galilee still needs to be protected, no matter who wins.

And there is a built-in factor in Judea and Samaria. The Jewish settlements there will not be dismantled by Labor, and will need some continuing support, even if they are not expanded. And the Labor Party may be more interested than Likud in discussing some security-minded terms with King Hussein -- but there is no indication that King Hussein will be interested in such discussions.

And, in general, if the Labor Party wins, the margin will be close enough so that it will need some other elements, such as the National Religious Party, in order to make a government. In short, nothing radical is going to happen but perhaps a shift in direction. The main positive feeling in Israel last week was about American/Israeli relations, which Israelis feel are in more solid shape that they have been in for a long time.

So there is no great national debate. Instead, the parties are mainly campaigning against the personalities in the other party. Both parties have hired comedians to do that on TV. And they have been running ads along those lines, such as the one reprinted elsewhere in this edition of the Bulletin. But maybe they do not need the heat of a great national debate right now. There are certain undebatable things that have to be done, whoever wins.