

Editorial

Italian Politics: The Calm before the Storm?

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On 12 and 13 June 2011, Italians went to the polls to vote in four referendums: two on laws encouraging the privatisation of water supply; one on a law seeking to re-start Italy's nuclear energy programme, and a fourth on the role of 'legitimate impediment' in legal proceedings. As so often in such cases, the significance of the vote lay at least as much in its broader political implications as in its implications for the specific issues on which voters were being asked to decide. And in this case, everyone knew that what they were actually doing was voting for or against the incumbent prime minister and his government – especially thanks to the Fukushima disaster. This had raised the distinct possibility, unusually for Italian referendums of recent years, that the turnout would reach 50 percent, the threshold required in order for the outcome, one way or another, to have legal validity. Thus it was that the centre left did everything it could to convince voters to go to the polls. The Government meanwhile took steps specifically designed to keep the turnout low – notably by introducing a clause designed to postpone the nuclear re-start by one year, this in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to have the referendum on the nuclear issue declared futile and thus inadmissible. In the event, turnout was over 57 percent (54 percent including voters resident abroad), the first time in sixteen years that consultations of this kind had aroused such interest. And Silvio Berlusconi came away as the clear and obvious loser, as in every case over 90 percent voted in favour of repeal of the law in question.

The defeat came less than a month after the local elections, analysed here by Stefano Braghiroli, which also saw a significant defeat for the Prime Minister. As Braghiroli points out, the elections suggested that Berlusconi's direct involvement, and personalisation of the campaign, had had a distinctly negative effect on the performance of the centre right. For this reason, Italian politics currently appears to be at an impasse, in a situation 'suggestive of 'waiting'' as Marangoni (p. 130) puts it in his update on the Government's legislative performance.

On the one hand, there has, not surprisingly, been a more or less significant decline in the strength of Berlusconi's leadership, with several

signs of dissent within his party, and therefore a growing question mark over the model of party he represents. As Claudia Mariotti points out in her article, the People of Freedom and Forza Italia before it are both parties whose officials and spokespersons have hitherto been virtually as one in perceiving their leader 'not as a normal political leader who embodies the ideals of his adherents, but more as a father figure...to whom they are tied by feelings of child-like devotion' (p. 48). It is not surprising then, that Ilvo Diamanti (2011: 1) has declared that the Second Republic has almost come to an end; for this is a regime that was built upon the power of Berlusconi and the type of 'personal party' he invented, a regime in which, as Diego Garzia's research in this issue demonstrates, partisan attachments have come to be based, precisely on individual attitudes towards party leaders.

On the other hand, the likelihood of an early departure of Berlusconi from the political scene and the possibility of early elections seem tempered by the Northern League's apparently poor prospects and by the state of the centre left: the May elections seemed to confound expectations that the League might benefit from the difficulties of Berlusconi's party, while pointing to considerable dissatisfaction among supporters with its performance to date. They also suggested that the centre left continued to be afflicted by the internal disunity that has almost become its hallmark.

In this situation of stalemate, the Prime Minister has taken a remarkably low profile - in some of his public appearances looking distinctly tired and worn out - while correspondingly, the profile of the President of the Republic has risen. In July he appeared to take over from the Prime Minister in mediating passage of an austerity budget (Walston, 2011) such that the measure even came to be dubbed the 'Napolitano-Tremonti Budget' (Cannavò, 2011). Shortly afterwards he made a number of public pronouncements - on matters ranging from the role of the judiciary to national unity and the appointment of government ministers - suggestive of a willingness openly to lead in areas where presidents most often mediate behind the scenes. In what has become a famous analogy, former Prime Minister, Giuliano Amato, once compared the presidential role with that of the player of an accordion:

When the political parties are strong, they prevent the President from "opening" and playing his accordion. If the parties are for whatever reason weak, then the President will be able to play the accordion how he likes to its full extension (Pasquino, 2011: 1).

It was no wonder, perhaps, that in the *Repubblica* article cited above, Diamanti (2011: 23) could write that Italy had become a de facto presidential republic.

In our view, the Presidency has been the object of far less academic attention than it warrants given the importance of its role in the Italian political system. It was for this reason that the Italian Politics Specialist

Group of the UK Political Studies Association took the step of sponsoring two panels on 'The Italian presidency in the post-war political system' at the Association's 61st annual conference held in London between 19 and 21 April. And it is for this reason that we are delighted to publish the article by Selena Grimaldi on the role of the President as a political actor 'to all effects' (p. 121) along with the review article by Gaspare Nevola on the significance of Giorgio Napolitano's contribution to the development of what the President has himself expressly called 'constitutional patriotism'.

This again highlights the unjustifiable neglect of the office. The President's efforts in the area of 'constitutional patriotism' represent, of course, his own distinctive contribution to the otherwise prosaic task of democratic presidents everywhere of promoting national integration. But in Italy the task is a crucially important one: as Vincenzo Memoli reminds us in his article on the implications of political knowledge, Italy is often depicted as a country 'characterised by low levels of support for democracy' (p. 79) and 'dissatisfaction with...institutional performance' (p. 80). Maria Tullia Gallanti's article provides support for an additional view we have long argued for, namely, that Italians' cynicism about the quality of their public institutions is very often misplaced. Misplaced or not, however, dissatisfaction is a reality as are the divisions – which also highlight the significance of presidential efforts at integration – discussed by Gabriele Bracci in his report of the proceedings of the 31 March roundtable organised by SISE, the Italian Society for Electoral Studies.

Roundtable participants clearly had different perspectives on these divisions but what seems to unite them is the idea that the divisions' future implications are very much open. So once again we are left with an impression of waiting and uncertainty. And as, towards the end of July, the country appeared to be being drawn, ever more ineluctably towards the eye of the international financial storm, the sensation was also one of calm before a deluge. Is economic and political turbulence imminent? If not, why not? If so, what will it mean? Hopefully in our December issue we will be able to provide some answers.

References

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