

special report

AFTER BERLUSCONI

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ON THE EVIDENCE of recent opinion polls and regional elections, it is likely that on 9th April Italian voters will oust Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right coalition and replace it with a centre-left coalition under the leadership of former Italian prime minister and European commission president Romano Prodi.

Then all hell will break loose. Should Berlusconi retire or be removed from politics, parties on all sides of the spectrum will begin a scramble for the 20 per cent or more of the electorate that is now attached to his Forza Italia. Voters from across the political spectrum are drawn to Berlusconi's brand of populism, but without the man himself, Forza Italia has no more coherence than other such populist groupings, and it would implode much like Pim Fortuyn's List in the Netherlands.

Even if that does not happen, and Berlusconi retains the leadership of a stable opposition coalition, the governing left is likely to tear itself apart. The new electoral law guarantees the winner a 25-seat majority by ensuring that the largest electoral coalition wins at least 340 seats in the chamber of deputies. But the law says nothing about how those seats will vote after they are apportioned or who they will support for prime minister. Indeed, some say that Francesco Rutelli—leader of the second largest centre-left party, Margherita—is already planning his post-electoral bid for the premiership.

The centre-left encompasses a strange combination of political movements. Margherita is a group of mainly former Christian Democrats commanding between 9 and 12 per cent of the vote. The larger centre-left party is a group of reconstructed ex-Communists called Left Democrats (Democratici di Sinistra or DS) led by Piero Fassino and Massimo D'Alema, with between 20 and 23 per cent of the vote. Even working together, however, Margherita and DS do not have the support necessary to defeat the ruling centre-right coalition. Victory for the centre-left therefore depends on these two large groups reaching agreement between themselves and a host of smaller entities, including Fausto Bertinotti's Communist Refoundation (Rifondazione Comunista or RC), which is backed by 7 to 9 per cent of voters.

April's Italian election should see the defeat of Berlusconi and the return of a fragmented centre-left coalition. Below the surface there is a "silent yearning" for a modernised Christian Democracy, yet no new generation of leaders to embody it

Romano Prodi sits astride the centre-left coalition with no party of his own, little budget and only a small set of advisers. The other party leaders—Rutelli and Fassino chief among them—have no desire to see Prodi build a power base independent of the parties they control. Indeed, Prodi's position as leader of the centre-left coalition depends upon his not working to create a separate party. His coalition partners would rather lose the election than lose control over their own followers.

CATHOLICISM IS STILL CENTRAL TO POLITICS

Whatever the immediate aftermath of the election, the April vote raises two medium-term possibilities that deserve attention. The first and most important is a return of Christian Democracy as a powerful, even hegemonic, force. The other, more elusive, possibility is the emergence of a new generation of modernising leaders.

During the cold war there were two certainties: the Christian Democrats would govern at the national level; the Communists would not. No matter how corrupt the Christian Democrats might become and how pure the Communists would claim to be, the logic of the cold war continued to shape the structure of Italian political life. Then the cold war ended, large-scale political corruption was revealed, and Italy's first republic collapsed. The Christian Democrats all but disappeared as a coherent group, both because they were so heavily tainted by scandal and also because the Italians adopted a first past the post electoral rule in 1993 for 75 per cent of parliamentary seats (the remaining 25 per cent were allocated by proportional representation) thus polarising the electorate between left and right.

Since the early 1990s, populism and left-right alternation have become the hallmarks of Italian politics. The populism is found mostly on the right. Umberto Bossi's Northern League (Lega Nord) grew out of his bid to redefine politics along a north-south divide by imagining a political community called "Padania" in the north. Gianfranco Fini has turned his National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale) from an extremist neo-fascist party into one with much broader appeal. But it is Berlusconi and Forza Italia that have real-



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Where will they go if Berlusconi loses?

ly defined the new brand of populism.

As for alternation, the second republic started on the right after the 1994 parliamentary elections, won by Berlusconi—although his premiership lasted only seven months. Then it shifted to the left. But it returned to the right in the battle between Berlusconi and Rutelli in 2001. Berlusconi won that contest and went on to create the most stable government in the history of postwar Italy.

Despite Berlusconi's successes at gaining and holding on to power, however, it would be a mistake to overestimate the significance of Italian populism or left-right alternation. Berlusconi carved a political movement out of the wreckage of the old Christian Democrats, but voting patterns have remained geographically stable, at least on the left, and party identification is tribal. Over time, the shock of the end of the cold war has dissipated and more traditional patterns of political organization have begun to reassert themselves.

More important, though, left-right alternation obscures the basic three-way cleavage in Italian politics between those who see themselves as liberal individualists, those who associate with the traditional left and those who identify themselves culturally with the teachings of the Catholic church. Any pattern of left-right alternation gives too much importance to the first two groups, and not enough to the third. For Italians are more apt to identify themselves in terms of their relationship to the church than in terms of their relationship to the state or the market. Even those who do not identify themselves as Catholic use Catholicism as the reference for the identity they do adopt.

THE YEARNING FOR CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY

As values and identity become more important in Italian politics, populism becomes less attractive and left-right alternation more inconvenient for Catholics sitting either side of the political centre. This may seem paradoxical; in many other European countries the rising importance of values and identity is a

boost to populists, mainly of the right. The reason it is different in Italy is the continuing political importance of Catholicism, and the desire of a sizeable section of voters for a modernised, centrist Christian Democracy.

There are at least three reasons why identity and values are becoming more important in Italian politics: immigration, EU enlargement and the war on terror. Immigration threatens identity and values within the country. EU enlargement threatens the promotion of Italian values outside. And yet the war on terror makes it more important for Italians to have a coherent set of values to hold on to.

Immigration into Italy is a new phenomenon; the country is better known as a source of migrants. In 1993, Italy held just under 600,000 immigrants, but ten years later the number had more than doubled to just over 1.5m. But taken as a percentage of the Italian population, this stock of immigrants is still very small. In 1993, immigrants were just 1 per cent of the total. By 2004, they were 3.4 per cent. The complaints that Italians voice about the foreign-born population include the usual list—drugs, crime, unemployment and so on. Populists like Fini—with his distinction between “foreigners” and “foreigners with Italian passports”—made early headway by exploiting such concerns. But the other parties soon caught up and now they all say similar things about the threat to Italian culture.

More troubling than immigration is the question of EU enlargement. When the EU was small and Italy was secure in its role as a founding member, the differences between European countries did not seem to matter. Now that it is much larger, however, Italy is under much more threat—and not just from the new arrivals. The heightened diversity of the EU has eroded its cosy collegiality, destroying old partnerships and creating new ones. For example, Spain and Poland joined forces in December 2003 to wreck the Italian-led negotiations for an EU constitution. In such a context, Italy must be more assertive if it is to defend its national interests.

The case of Rocco Buttiglione reveals the dilemmas that such new assertiveness can pose. When Berlusconi selected Buttiglione in autumn 2004 to be the Italian member of the European commission, he did so in order to preserve his governing coalition. Buttiglione is the honorary president of a group of right-wing Christian Democrats led by Pier Ferdinando Casini, which, while small, was essential to the stability of Berlusconi's government. During his confirmation hearings, Buttiglione was criticised for his attitudes on homosexuals, women and immigration. He responded that these beliefs all stemmed from his Catholic faith. For many Italians, that

response struck a chord. Even if they disagreed with Buttiglione's remarks, they remain suspicious of a Europe in which being devoutly Catholic is a bar to public office.

The war on terror acts as a political catalyst in Italy. The terrorist threat heightens awareness of immigration; it strengthens both the importance of Europe and the salience of divisions between European countries; and it gives legitimacy to the idea of a clash between Christianity and Islam. These influences operate across Europe. But the Italians have a particularly hard time reconciling their role in Iraq—where until recently 3,000 Italian troops were stationed—with their commitment to a post-militarist Europe; their civic duty with their cultural identity; and their revulsion of fundamentalism with their embrace of Catholicism.

The easiest way to resolve the tension is through religion as identity—which is why the smaller Christian Democratic parties at the centre of the Italian political spectrum have been pushing the debate on values. By focusing attention on the unifying principles of the Catholic faith, Christian Democrats can aspire

to broaden their appeal beyond the centre and so reassert their political hegemony. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a number of issues relating to fundamental values have come to the fore during the run-up to the 9th April elections. In the past few months, Italians have debated fertility assistance, abortion rights, and now civil unions for same-sex partnerships. Italians are unwilling to

take a strong stand on fertility assistance. They are reluctant to surrender their abortion rights, but they acknowledge the moral ambiguity that surrounds the practice. And they are clearly uncomfortable with the celebration of civil unions even as they recognise that such partnerships are a fact of Italian society.

The impact of these debates has been stronger on the left than the right. There is a clear division between competing left-wing Italian cultures on these issues—with Catholic groups moving in one direction, working-class and radical groups in another. Prodi, a Catholic, has had difficulty striking a unifying position. Clemente Mastella, leader of the small Popolari-UDEUR group on the centre-left and yet who was once aligned with Casini on the centre-right, is happy to make clear his opposition to same-sex unions. While this may not affect the outcome of the elections, it does not augur well for the stability of a centre-left government once the votes are counted.

The Christian Democrats were not the only

political group to splinter after the cold war. The Communists broke apart too. In the resulting confusion it was easy to imagine a reorientation of Italian politics along the kind of left-right divide that is found in countries like Britain, France or the US. The introduction of a first past the post system helped to foster such polarisation. But now that the electoral system has reverted to proportional representation as a result of a law passed in December, the prospects for a return to some form of hegemonic centrist Christian Democracy have increased. More strikingly, the new provision that the largest political group automatically wins a majority of the seats could mitigate the Christian Democratic problem of shrinking church attendance and electoral support over recent decades. The Christian Democrats claimed 48 per cent of the vote in the late 1940s, just under 40 per cent in the early 1970s and just under 30 per cent in the early 1990s. A united Christian Democratic bloc located at the centre of the political spectrum would only have to improve slightly on such numbers to be sure of a permanent parliamentary majority—at least in the chamber and probably in the senate as well. Such electoral maths has to be appealing to ambitious politicians, whether or not the desire to recreate a Christian Democratic centre is sincere.

THE ABSENT CENTRE

But there are other obstacles that prevent the centre from coming together. The most obvious among these are the political parties themselves. So long as each party exists to promote specific individuals, there are few incentives to sacrifice leadership in a small party to become a member—even a leading member—of a larger one. Even more important is what goes on beneath the surface, where political parties and the many other institutions of Italian civil society intersect. At that level, what matters is not so much what changed at the end of the cold war as what remained the same.

Italian political parties were always more than just vehicles for fighting elections. Industries, banks, foundations and co-operatives all connected up to politics and political parties all connected back down. In this sense, the unity of Italian Christian Democracy was always more apparent than real. Within one political party, there were many groups with different links to business and society, all of which were jockeying for power, position and markets. Such connections did not end with the fall of the Berlin wall, with the “clean hands” investigations of the early 1990s or with the subsequent turmoil in the party system. Party control—what is called *partitocrazia*—was weakened, but the interdependence between



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politics and society remains strong.

The links between political parties and other groups are hardly unique to the Christian Democrats. Berlusconi's connections are obvious because they take place through the man himself. But connections also exist on the left. The recent scandal involving the Unipol insurance company is a case in point. Unipol is owned by the so-called "red co-operatives," organisations that were affiliated with the Italian Communist party (PCI). The ideological affiliation of these co-operatives has diminished with the demise of communism and now they trade much like any other business entity in Italy. Nevertheless, institutional links between the co-operatives and left-wing politicians remain strong, having been passed down from the PCI to the DS. The scandal, such as it is, stems from the public identification of the political interests of the DS with the economic interests of Unipol—leading to ironic comments from Berlusconi about the need for politicians of the left to create a clear distinction between business and politics.

Hence while it is possible to entertain scenarios of a resurgent Christian Democracy in Italy, it is hard to see how such scenarios would work in practice. What Italy lacks at the moment is a modernising political leader with the skill and force of a Bill Clinton or a Tony Blair. On the right, Fini is charismatic, but his neo-fascist origins and the membership of his political party make him unattractive to too much of the electorate. On the left, Fassino has difficulty reaching to the centre, let alone across. Where questions of values are important, the ex-communist left represents a minority of views, however substantial a minority. Berlusconi is, well, Berlusconi. Whatever his attraction, his time has come and—many hope—it has gone as well.

A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS?

The future leadership of Italy must be drawn from the ranks of the Christian Democrats, whether formally associated with the small centrist Christian Democratic parties or—as seems more likely—drawn from one of the larger political movements like Margherita where ex-Christian Democrats abound. Such leaders must recognise the importance of cultural Catholicism and they must act to preserve those values at the heart of Italian identity (even as they embrace the real progress that Italian society has made since the end of the second world war in terms of gender equality and tolerance of alternative lifestyles). They must also liberate Italian politics from its close symbiosis with other aspects of economic and social life. And to be credible in this role, they will have to come from the generation that has emerged since

the collapse of the first republic.

Finally, such modernising leadership must accept that stability in Italian politics is provided not by hegemony over the centre, but by a periodic alternation between centre-right and centre-left. Such alternation is important not as a reflection of any fundamental cleavage in Italian society, but as a check on personal ambition and as a vital opportunity to "throw the bums out." Put another way, Italy's new leaders must resist the temptation to try to seize power in perpetuity—by constructing a centrist coalition that, by dint of the new electoral laws, could easily command a permanent majority. Given the new electoral formula and the "silent yearning" for a return to Christian Democratic unity, that temptation is real.

The most likely outcome of the 9th April election is that Italian politicians will battle for position in a fluid and ill-disciplined legislature. Even if the centre-left can hold together as a government, there is little chance that Italy will be able to make the hard choices it faces: to respond to the country's growing fiscal crisis, to prepare for the ageing of Italian society, to accept the inevitable immigration and to protect and promote Italian values and culture at home or abroad. The list of challenges is a long one, made all the longer by the actions of Berlusconi himself—not least through his domination of the media and his assault on the judiciary. Italy will not collapse, nor is it likely to leave the euro. But it needs leadership to move forward, and the prospect for such leadership is remote whoever wins. Moreover, at present, there are very few prominent younger Italian politicians and none in the leadership of the big parties.

Then again, there is a chance that a new generation of Italians will emerge from this election with the vision and self-discipline to reform their country. This is the aspiration behind the proposal to create a Democratic party of the centre-left that was launched with great fanfare by a group of young academics in January. Two of the academics—Filippo Andreatta and Salvatore Vassallo—are very close to the Prodi camp, and Prodi, unlike the leaders of Margherita and DS, welcomed the newcomer. But debate about the party was soon swallowed up in arguments between the existing parties as they tried to consolidate their hold over the new electoral system and prepare for the April ballot.

Italy in 2006 looks a bit like Britain in 1992. Indeed, Berlusconi may surprise us all and cling to power as John Major did. That may be just what Italy's younger group of political leaders needs. Perhaps another round of Berlusconi is the only force strong enough to give coherence to the centre-left and clear the way for a new generation of leaders. ■