

Dismal Elections for a Dismal Country

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Abstract: Berlusconi and the Northern League won the 2010 regional elections. This article is intended only to raise a question. Did they win because right-wing voters were satisfied with their performance in government – or simply because, while they have the ability to mobilise their supporters, the left discourages its own potential constituency?

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Italy really is a dismal country: dismal and wretched. A country in which a racist party has won an election because its closest ally no longer enjoys, for a thousand different reasons, the confidence of its voters. About such reasons there are a number of questions to be asked. Have right-wing voters taken their distance from Silvio Berlusconi because he has been up to all kinds of mischief – he could, in all honesty, hardly have behaved worse – or because he has been insufficiently radical? Have they done so because they want a government still more ferocious towards immigrants, and still meaner towards the South, schools, universities and the health service? Search me.

What is certain is that it is not the first time that we have seen placid family men, loving husbands and fathers, become transformed into persecutors. Nothing is more dangerous than the trivialisation of hatred. And nothing is more dangerous than to make apparently obvious certain lines of reasoning and the arguments that flow from them. The national anthropology is changing. Perhaps it will be necessary to start going about wearing yellow stars – to remind the loving fathers, the gentle mothers and the numerous affectionate grandparents who vote for the Northern League that one shouldn't play with fire: that they too could end up committing acts they currently find horrific.

Otherwise, the outcome of the 2010 regional elections was much as was to be expected. The centre left lost where it was expected to lose; the centre right won where victory was a foregone conclusion and where the centre left had helped it to win. That Lazio was a lost cause in the wake of the sickening Marazzo affair was highly predictable. Emma Bonino did

very well in limiting the damage. Indeed she offered an example which the centre left should make up its mind to follow. She, a political figure on the national stage, with an international reputation, lent her authority to a cause that was heavily compromised. A Radical in territory that some think is still under the thumb of the Vatican, she even showed that the presumed Catholic influence is limited and disciplined. Voters have many shortcomings, in terms of competence and above all of awareness. But there are many more of them with judicious and mature outlooks than observers believe. Practising Catholics are divided between right and left and the interventions of the Church, instrumental as they are, do not determine their choices for them.

In the end, Bonino lost narrowly. If the centre left had done the same thing in Campania and in Calabria, and perhaps in Veneto and Lombardy, then, while it is by no means certain that it would have won, it would at least have got by with greater dignity. But instead, the leaders of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) were unwilling to commit themselves to the fight. They didn't want to run any risks. They didn't want to make any bad impressions. Anna Finocchiaro tried once in Sicily; but it might have been better had she not done so, because no sooner had she suffered her - resounding - defeat, than she ran off to claim her substantial consolation prize.

The candidate in Veneto was awful; the one in Lombardy even worse: it was difficult to see where, in terms of the programme, the difference lay with Roberto Formigoni. On the contrary: Filippo Penati supports vigilante patrols (*le ronde*), and as provincial president, it seems, he even funded them. He fell without honour. And yet Venice (where Renato Brunetta was defeated) and Lecco (where it was Roberto Castelli's turn to look foolish) show that in the deep north the battle is in no sense lost - that what is needed more than anything else is to gird the loins of the dispersed troops and to stop hiding behind any insignificant candidate of the likes of Giuseppe Bortolussi.

To think that some regions are not worth devoting energy to is a disastrous idea. Not only are there places in Lombardy - municipalities and provinces - where supporters of the left are even in a majority - but to give up the fight before it has even started provokes discouragement. And a clear-cut defeat is more damaging than a losing battle fought honourably. The problem is that none of the PD's highly presumptuous national leaders are willing to commit themselves to the fight. They prefer to wait for the elections to go badly and then to set a trap for the person taking their turn to be party secretary. This week is marked by the celebration of Easter, and betrayals have been common in recent days.

Things went badly in Piedmont too. Mercedes Bresso won by a neck five years ago and she lost by a neck the other day. There is nothing to regret. There are questions to be asked about why, after five years in office,

a small but crucial proportion of her voters abandoned her. For one thing, it needs to be asked why the most high-profile members of her executive were defeated so ignominiously. In the second place, it is stupid to blame Beppe Grillo and his candidates. His is a crude form of protest, one that leads nowhere other than to expressions of spite. But the protest is not anti-political: after all, it expresses a demand for probity and transparency which the Bresso administration evidently failed to satisfy. Among the questions to be posed are: was it not unwise – indeed an arrogant gesture of defiance – to organise a ‘pro-Tav’ demonstration in support of the Lyons-Turin rail link when doubts about the Tav project (*treno ad alta velocità*: ‘high-speed train’) were so widespread among centre-left voters? It is enough, for heaven’s sake, to have Berlusconi playing the part of the politician who insists on governing with a completely free hand. On the part of his competitors we would expect more by way of a willingness to engage in dialogue. In short, it is as always too easy to blame others. If a small number of centre-left supporters abstain or vote for Grillo, then they are neither stupid nor blameworthy. They may be mistaken, but they have a reason for being mistaken.

Fortunately, there was Nichi Vendola, who did well and won a comforting victory. The centre left didn’t want him, but he stuck around and succeeded. Let us not get too big-headed, though. The attitude of the inexhaustible Massimo D’Alema was shameful. (When is this character going to retire incidentally? Hasn’t he done enough damage already?) D’Alema wanted to eliminate Vendola; and Vendola’s resistance was laudable. However, it must be acknowledged that the Union of the Centre (Unione di Centro, UDC) gave him a helping hand. Nevertheless, Vendola demonstrated something very important: that it is possible to win and to govern only by uniting all of the left from the lukewarm to the most passionate.

Claudio Burlando, who had managed to bring on board even the UDC, was successful too. That the UDC is indispensable has yet to be shown. It is not yet clear which side it is on, nor, in particular, whereabouts, politically, its supporters are situated. Since, however, defeating the right requires the broadest alignment possible, and that those belonging to it need to learn to co-exist, perhaps in order to avoid the country’s civil and moral degradation degenerating into racism (and disastrous economic decline as well as a thousand other bad things), Vendola and Burlando are examples to be studied.

In Campania and in Calabria on the other hand, there was nothing that could have been done. Antonio Bassolino left behind him only debris. It was perhaps not entirely his fault. But he was unable to avoid the mountains of refuse collapsing on top of him. In addition, when it came to selecting a candidate, the choice fell to the one he disliked the most – never a wise course. The outgoing office-holder must necessarily support the

candidate who might succeed him. Even though Bassolino's popularity had collapsed there was no need to court his opposition – which is what happened to Vincenzo De Luca. If Bassolino was to have been disowned – and good reasons for doing so certainly existed – then it should have been done immediately, when the refuse crisis first blew up. Now what was needed was a very high-profile personality, not De Luca – whose legal difficulties were not in truth such as to render him unworthy but whose profile was insufficient.

Calabria has been a victim of the terrible misfortunes of the contemporary South – which has been abandoned to its fate. Its ruling class is what it is. Its social environment is unable to help it to mature. The best of the area's young people leave. Assisted by a terrible degree of bipartisan complicity, twenty years have passed since the South was last a national-level political issue. Nothing can be done, it is said. Indeed the South must be isolated, say some, because it is infecting the entire country. This is untrue. The truth is that no-one is any longer helping the best part of southern society. It survives thanks to handouts of a charitable kind but there is no one helping it to grow and expand. And people still amuse themselves with the idea that the southern ruling classes must learn to swim on their own. This has not happened and indeed the situation has got worse. The truth is that the South is paying for the general – economic, civil and moral – decline of the country. It is the same old story: the South progresses when the North progresses. When one declines, the other declines too. Who knows why no-one on the centre left understands this. A vicious circle has been set in motion, one that must at all costs be broken. The old Communist Party in such circumstances used to collar a prestigious national leader and, as a first step, to send him to those parts to put the party's house in order. Who could Pier Luigi Bersani ask to take this on?

He is right to say that things didn't go too badly. It could have been worse. His is not a party but a motley crowd of individuals engaged in a no-holds-barred struggle over modest positions of power and modest honorific posts which, however, are well recompensed. There is no one willing to make any effort. Under these circumstances, could things have gone any better?

The other parties on the centre left are also suffering. Antonio Di Pietro is losing momentum. He has found in Grillo a competitor to be feared. And the hard left is weakened by its divisions. It might perhaps find in Vendola a leader with the capacity to win new voters, leaving aside the mistakes he himself has made. He shouldn't have left Communist Refoundation after he lost the conference vote in 2008. It is time to bury the past. On the left there is an abyss to be filled. No one talks about jobs anymore. Poverty is growing. The PD is so busy courting business that someone needs to take care of an important part of the electorate; to win back the confidence of

wavering voters; to outline a project to be negotiated on a realistic basis with other partners.

There are many – too many – abstainers. There are probably more of them on the left than on the right, for understandable reasons. In the former area the political offer is less adequate. Instead of pursuing the unlikely utopia of a party with a majoritarian vocation – a utopia that has placed the government of the country in the hands of an overwhelming majority – it is instead necessary to start by putting the pieces back together again. It is not an impossible task. What is urgently needed is a project: it should be clear that between the populist right – which at least promises security if not jobs – and the postmaterialist left – which pays little attention to jobs, poverty or pensions either, dreaming only of unlikely modernisation while hiding its deficiencies behind the banner of Berlusconi's legal difficulties and his arrogance – the former is more attractive: while it successfully mobilises those on the right, decisive segments of those on the left prefer to abstain.

Paradoxically, among the comments on the results, Umberto Bossi's was the one most strenuously laying claim to the support of workers. There is no truth in it, or it is true only to a minimal degree. Workers who vote for the League are workers who have always voted for the right. Their number is not insignificant. But in reality, workers who voted for the left shifted only marginally and the League benefitted mainly from a radicalisation of the moderate vote. In the meantime, however, Bossi's talk about the workers made it seem as though the centre left had forgotten about them: only at the last minute did Bersani decide to visit the Mirafiori factory.

Supporters of the left, it is as well to note, are also more exacting in terms of public probity. They are not resigned to the idea that those representing them are no different – or insufficiently so – to representatives of the right. Equally, they are fed up with the spectacle of internecine struggles between factions and dignitaries. It is for these reasons too that many don't go to vote, or vote for Grillo.

Finally, it is not even impossible to devise techniques of communication that can compete with the mass media-based ones available in abundance to the right. Would that the left stopped pretending to be a victim of its adversary's ubiquity in the media! This is a given, just as the difference in the financial resources available to the parties of the right and those of the people was a long time ago. And what about a return to grass-roots campaigning, preferably every day, not just the day before elections? It is tiring but perhaps it pays.