

'Alternation? What Alternation?' The Second Republic and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation

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Abstract: The concept of 'transition' has been widely used as an analytical frame for understanding the continuing turbulence of the Italian political system since the fall of the First Republic. Critics argue that, after nearly two decades of 'transition' and with no endpoint in sight, the model has lost its explanatory force. In this paper I argue that the 'transition' perspective represents a political reality - a coherent set of expectations and pressures, widely acknowledged by Italian political actors - and one which the Italian Left, in particular, cannot afford to ignore. In terms of timescale, I argue for the continuing relevance of the 'democratic consolidation' model and suggest that the Italian Republic has been 'in transition' since 1948.

Keywords: Transition, Partito Democratico, democratic consolidation, ex-Communist, Second Republic

Since 1992, when the first signs of the Tangentopoli corruption scandal came to light, the fortunes of the Left - and in particular the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI) and its successors, including the present-day Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) - have been intimately connected to the perception of the Italian political system as 'in transition'.

In what follows, I discuss criticisms of the concept of the Italian 'transition' and develop a model of the transition with some explanatory force, drawing on the history of the First Republic and the model of democratic consolidation developed by Geoffrey Pridham (1990). The Italian transition, I argue, is shorthand for a politics in which conventional left/right antagonisms are subordinated to three themes: the establishment of alternation in government; an end to the exclusion of the Left, and of 'anti-system' parties more generally, and the assertion of the primacy of democratic politics over special interests and systems of corrupt exchange. I then examine the difficult and contradictory demands which this politics has placed on parties of the Left. I focus on the 'alternation' criterion and

consider the PD as an attempted solution to a longstanding problem in electoral arithmetic, reviewing the history of the centre left in the First Republic and in the subsequent period of transition. Finally, I review Walter Veltroni's leadership of the PD, characterised by a strategic focus on building a party capable of alternation, and its results; I conclude by suggesting that the PD will inevitably return to a full engagement with the transition agenda.

Transition? What transition?

The concept of an Italian transition has come under sustained criticism. It is undeniable, to take the most obvious objection, that the concept of 'transition' implies a relatively brief interval between two settled states: 'if "transition" implies that a polity is in between one regime and another, then the idea that this is true of Italy has been increasingly hard to sustain as time has gone on, simply because of the unequivocal failure of all attempts to complete it' (Bull and Newell, 2009: 42). The nineteen-year duration of the supposed Italian transition equates to almost half of the First Republic's 44-year life. On these grounds alone, it can be argued that these turbulent years should not be regarded as a transitional period before the establishment of a Second Republic, but as the Second Republic itself.

It could reasonably be objected that this argument is excessively normative: a typical transition period may only last a year or two, but anomalous political situations can produce anomalous and extended transition periods. Moreover, if we assume a short transitional period but believe that the current period continues to be characterised by anomalous and disordered political processes, this prompts the question of how we should characterise a period with more orderly and 'normal' politics, when and if such a period becomes established. Looking forward to a *Third Republic* – or even maintaining that the Second has come and gone, and the Third already exists (Calise, 2009: 151) – seems unsatisfactory, if only on the grounds of parsimony.

A more fundamental objection is that any transition has a destination as well as a source; in other words, the 'transition' framing implies a known endpoint. This in turn suggests that the supposed endpoint may never be achieved: political actors are under no obligation to fulfil the expectations of political scientists. As a result, the impression of a period of transition may be prolonged indefinitely, producing a misleading impression of continuing disorder and obscuring the establishment of significant stable reference points and agreements on practice and principle.

This argument does not discount the period of turbulence initiated by Tangentopoli, but suggests that a renewed political order may already have been pieced together out of the wreckage of the First Republic. While this order may not match up to the future Second Republic imagined by

theorists of the Italian transition, this is a secondary point; the relevant questions concern whether it has established itself, enjoys popular assent and has the capacity to reproduce itself. If the new political order meets these criteria, we can reasonably assume that any transitional period is over – and, perhaps, has been for some time. Viewed in this light, shorn of the implicit teleology of the Second Republic model, the transitional period itself may take on very different characteristics. Thus Briquet argues: ‘the historical cycle which Italy underwent in the last decade of the twentieth century consisted above all of a brutal process of replacement of political elites, far more than it was the product of an abortive attempt to restore transparency and morality at the heart of politics’ (Briquet, 2007: 335)

I have taken issue with Briquet’s reading of Tangentopoli and its aftermath elsewhere (Edwards, 2008). Here I want to set the concept of a continuing Italian transition in a broader context. Pridham’s (1990) work on ‘democratic consolidation’ remains relevant here. Pridham suggested that the process of transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy is followed by an analytically distinct stage of ‘consolidation’, whose completion is characterised by two ‘negative’ and two ‘positive’ achievements. On the negative side, we should look for ‘a peaceful or basically uncontested transfer of power between parties in government and opposition, with the implication that serious “anti-system” tendencies have disappeared’, and for ‘potential challenges or threats to the new system from non-political actors [to] diminish and eventually fade’.¹ In positive terms, consolidation is secure when ‘government performance is no longer systemically crucial and merely reflects on the standing of the party or parties in power’, and when ‘there is evidence that the political culture is being “remade” in a system-supportive direction’ (Pridham, 1990: 108).

A peaceful transfer of power from government to opposition, with no serious ‘anti-system’ tendencies involved; few or no challenges from forces alien to democracy; an end to the perception that government performance reflects on the system as a whole; evolution of political culture in a ‘system-supportive’ direction: what is immediately obvious in the Italian context is how poorly these criteria were met by the First Republic. At no time in its history did power pass from government to opposition. This, of course, relates directly to the second part of Pridham’s formulation. Any transfer of power away from the ruling Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrats, DC) must needs give power to the PCI, whose electoral appeal and ideological breadth was second only to the DC’s own; the PCI, however, was perceived (or labelled) as an ‘anti-system’ party: a left-wing counterpart to the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, MSI).

The concept of the ‘anti-system’ party was always problematic, bundling together ideological, relational and purely ascriptive criteria (Capoccia, 2002). The model of ‘opposed extremisms’, each an equal threat

to Italian democracy, was particularly hard to justify on ideological grounds, given the consistent moderation of the PCI and the party's impeccable anti-fascist credentials. Viewed in purely relational terms, however, the 'anti-system' framing was highly functional, justifying – indeed, making imperative – the DC's continuous occupation of the centre (in both senses of the term) from 1948 to 1994. It should also be noted that the PCI only partially challenged the assumptions under which it was excluded, operating its own *conventio ad excludendum* of the Left: in line with its self-presentation as a moderate and constitutional party, the PCI operated as 'gatekeeper' to the extreme Left, admitting some groups and ideologies to the party's orbit but denouncing others with as much fervour as the Christian Democrats themselves (Edwards, 2009).

Pridham's second criterion, the absence of systemic challenges from actors based outside the democratic system, was not met until fairly late in the First Republic's life: the last serious coup attempt took place in 1970, while Italian political exchanges continued to be played out in the shadow of reserve armies and secret arms dumps for some time afterwards. External threats defined more broadly – to include threats from forces with a non- or pre-democratic power base to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the political system, as well as its existence – overshadowed the First Republic throughout its history, and ultimately destroyed it: this was a system in which democratic politics took second place, with first place variously taken by clandestine networks, organised crime and mere local rent-seekers (Allum and Allum, 2008: 349). Addressing Pridham's third criterion, the system was also overshadowed by the recurring suspicion that government crises and failures betrayed more fundamental problems: a suspicion which the explosion of Tangentopoli showed to be well founded. The political cultures of the First Republic, lastly, were not so much system-supportive as system-avoidant. Political commentary assumed a certain level of literacy in the specialised language of *politichese* (Croci, 2001), but also drew on bodies of ideas which would seldom find expression in parliamentary debate: distinct liberal, Catholic and Communist cultures coexisted, typically oriented to the press, publishing and the universities rather than to government. The continuing appeal of the governments of the First Republic rested far more on sub-cultural and material ties – the *voto di appartenenza* ('vote of belonging') and *voto di scambio* ('exchange vote') – than on consonance with broader political cultures.

Reworking Pridham's criteria slightly in the light of the Italian post-war experience, we can say that an enduringly consolidated democratic system will have something like the following features:

Primacy of democratic politics: no challenges to the legitimacy or functioning of the democratic system from forces with a non-democratic power base

Alternation: consecutive peaceful and uncontested transfers of power between government and opposition, in both directions

Inclusion: no parties with a significant electoral base regarded as 'anti-system' and excluded from all possible governmental alliances

Two remaining criteria are perhaps indicators of successful consolidation rather preconditions for consolidation to be achieved, and can be phrased as follows:

System resilience: policy failures understood and acted on as such, not as indicators of the need for systemic reform

Democratic political culture: debate within the political sphere and within civil society conducted in terms which tend to entrench the above principles

Newell suggests that 'the apparent absence of any political actor or group of actors sufficiently powerful to impose a solution that would end the transition in effect meant that the [endpoint] did not exist, or at least could not be identified', going on to suggest that 'Italian political debate has, *at least since the 1980s*, been characterised, on the one hand, by a general consensus that fundamental institutional reform is needed, and, on the other, by a lack of agreement over what needs to be changed' (Newell, 2009: 5 emphasis in original). I would suggest, rather, that the criteria for democratic consolidation effectively supply the missing definition of the endpoint of the period of transition, as well as suggesting a framework within which the politics of the period of transition can be understood. Tangentopoli fuelled and amplified a debate which had already begun (or recommenced) during the 1980s, making shamefully public the defects of the First Republic. This was a republic in which democratic politics was permanently overshadowed by networks of more or less corrupt exchange. It was a system which had never known alternation, and which had systematically excluded its second party from national government. And, crucially, it was a system in which the many failings of the governing party were seen as symptoms of a malaise extending far beyond particular policy choices, resolvable only through systemic reform.

The crisis initiated in 1992 swept away entrenched obstacles to the process of democratic consolidation and raised awareness of the need to pursue the process with greater consistency: the Italian transition began with the awareness that the First Republic could not continue and the aspiration to build something better. When the First Republic's democratic institutions and processes were described as 'blocked', what was being

blocked was the full consolidation of the democratic system imposed on Italy in 1948. Far from regarding the period since 1992 as too long to be called transitional, we can see the First Republic itself as a 44-year period of transition, albeit one which halted far short of its endpoint. The upheaval of 1992 was seized on not only by Briquet's aspirant caste of junior politicians but by political groups with a genuine enthusiasm for resuming the process of democratic consolidation – as well as, in most cases, a partisan interest in the anticipated outcome. It is this project of renewed democratic consolidation, begun in the unprecedentedly fluid conditions of 1992-3, which is now associated with the concept of 'transition'.

The Left in midstream, 1992-

Despite the length of time which it has already continued and the possibility that its implicit endpoint will never be reached, the Italian transition is a reality. More precisely, it is a political reality: a set of goals which are widely considered to form a coherent agenda, together with a diffuse sense that this agenda needs to be pursued if Italy is ever to emerge from the transition into normality.

The fortunes of the Left since 1992 have been inextricably linked to the project of the Italian transition, on three levels – each of which has caused problems for the Left's post-Communist majority component. Firstly, the identity of 'reformist' has carried with it a commitment to the three goals identified above: alternation in government; an end to the exclusion of the Left; the reassertion of the primacy of politics over corporate interests or corrupt exchanges. Which is to say, not that any party situating itself in the 'reformist' camp must embrace all of these goals, but that any such party must be willing to ally itself with other parties whose goals these are. The result has been, not merely the creation of 'conditions of *imperfect bipolarism* [superimposed on] a multi-polar reality' (Edwards, 2005: 229 emphasis in original), but the elevation of the goals of the 'transition' into an overriding (albeit imperfect) bipolarity. Since 1992 the primary cleavage in Italian politics has been between those parties which support *any* of the goals of the transition and those which oppose *all* of them. The democratic Left has had no choice but to join the 'pro-transition' forces, and to devote at least some of its efforts to acting as the centre of a 'pro-transition' alliance; the emblem of this imperative is the seemingly unshakeable alliance between the PCI's successors and Antonio Di Pietro, an authoritarian conservative leading a personal party.

The second sense in which the identity of the Left is bound up with the transition project follows from the first. The parties of the Left have consistently been committed (sometimes reluctantly) to creating the conditions in which all three of the goals of the transition could be met: not only alternation in power but also an end to corruption and an end to the

exclusion of the Left. In other words, the goals of the transition have not only influenced the Left's strategic priorities and its choice of coalition partners within the electoral party system, but its choice of governmental coalition partners and its policy programmes within the parliamentary party system.

Bardi (2007) suggests that a centrifugal logic of mutual differentiation and inter-party competition continues to apply within the parliamentary party system, even while the bipolarism of the electoral party system mandates centripetal competition within and to a lesser extent between the two main blocs. The implication of this model, applied to the complex and imperfect bipolarism produced by the three distinct goals of 'transition', is that a broad Left whose component parts are committed to different elements of the transition project will always be at a disadvantage with respect to a Right which is united in rejecting them all: the logic of party self-interest will always encourage one party to denounce its allies' backsliding from its particular commitments, another to dissociate itself from its allies' excessive zeal.

These concerns are far from hypothetical: witness Romano Prodi's decision in May 2006 to entrust the Ministry of Justice to Clemente Mastella, a past (and future) ally of Silvio Berlusconi who had never shown much enthusiasm for any of the three touchstone policies, and who has since been involved in corruption investigations. Di Pietro, whom an outside observer might have considered a more appropriate candidate, was instead made Minister for Infrastructure and Transport. While this tactical allocation of portfolios minimised the opportunities for Di Pietro to outflank his own government, it did not ultimately prevent Mastella from bringing the Prodi government down, defecting from the majority so as to pre-empt a majoritarian electoral reform which would have promoted alternation at the cost of destroying his own party's prospects.

Thirdly and crucially, two of the three goals of transition relate directly to the Left itself. The Left parties which engaged in the project of bringing about the transition would also be transformed by it; changes to those parties would be among the conditions by which it could be known that the transition was complete. On the far side of the phase of transition, in other words, there would be a Left party capable of alternating in power with a party of the Right: a party substantial enough either to form a government on its own or to dominate a governing coalition, and aiming not to occupy the centre but to occupy the Left and draw support from the centre - and hence periodically alternate in power with the Right. Since the first version of the Ulivo (Olive-tree) coalition was established in the mid-1990s, it has been generally accepted that this party must be built on the successor party to the Right and centre of the PCI together with successors to the left of the DC: hence Prodi's consistent commitment to a dual-track project, to build both the *Unione*, a broad alliance of all parties committed to the transition,

and the Ulivo, a core alliance based on successor parties to the DC (La Margherita, ('the Daisy')) and the PCI (1991-8: Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left, PDS); 1998-2007: Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats, DS)).

There would also be a Left which was not excluded: after the transition, no significant Left parties would be labelled as 'anti-system'. Much hangs on how this second criterion is interpreted. As noted above, the exclusion of the PCI from power in the First Republic did not prevent the party from operating its own exclusive policies towards the Left outside the party; indeed, dissociating the PCI from disorderly extreme-left elements was a key manoeuvre in making the party itself seem a suitable candidate for political power. The PCI, in other words, did not challenge the principle of excluding the Left on the grounds of its anti-system tendencies, but only the definition of who was to be excluded and by whom. The Left which succeeded in gaining entry to the outer reaches of the DC's system of power, at the time of the Historic Compromise, was itself responsible for the exclusion of the far Left.

It is true that a political system which can include every political tendency in existence is probably neither desirable nor feasible: apart from anything else, some parties proclaim their own 'anti-system' identity. (Following the 2008 election, the Trotskyist party, Sinistra Critica ('the Critical Left') laid down as one of its fundamental principles 'refusal to become involved in governing the current society' (Sinistra Critica, 2008)). What should be avoided – and would not be consistent with the goal of political inclusion – is the somewhat Kafkaesque logic of the First Republic, whereby the authoritative and damning label of 'anti-system' was, at least in part, an ascriptive status which could be assigned or withdrawn at will by a party's opponents.

The alternation that never was, 1948-2008

While Walter Veltroni's leadership of the PD was unusually unsuccessful, he was not the first reformist political leader to give high priority to the goal of producing a Left party capable of alternation. Table 1 shows the percentage vote share obtained at every national election between 1953 and 1992 by seven categories of party: the DC; the DC's actual or potential allies; the PCI / PDS; reformist parties; parties of the radical Left; parties of the 'anti-system' Right; and all other parties. The 'reformist' category includes the Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party, PSI) in 1948 and 1953; from 1976 on it includes the Radical Party, the Greens (1987 and 1992) and la Rete ('the Network' (1992)). The 'anti-system' Right category includes the MSI, the Monarchist Party (prior to 1972), the Lega Lombarda (Lombard League (1987)) and Lega Nord (the Northern League (1992)). The next two rows show the vote share for two possible blocs: the largest

possible DC bloc, i.e. the DC together with all parties which could have allied with it at the time; and the largest imaginable PCI bloc – a more speculative figure, combining the PCI vote with the vote for ‘reformist’ parties. (Votes for radical Left parties are not included in this bloc). The last three rows contain figures for the difference between the PCI vote and the DC vote; the difference between the maximum PCI bloc and the DC vote alone; and the difference between the votes for the maximum PCI bloc and the maximum DC bloc.

Table 1: Vote share at Italian parliamentary elections (Chamber of Deputies), 1953-92

	1953	1958	1963	1968	1972	1976	1979	1983	1987	1992
<i>DC</i>	40.1	42.4	38.3	39.1	38.7	38.7	38.3	32.9	34.3	29.7
<i>DC allies</i>	9.1	9.5	28.3	22.3	21.5	17.4	18.5	23.5	23.1	23.6
<i>PCI/PDS</i>	22.6	22.7	25.3	26.9	27.1	34.4	30.4	29.9	26.6	16.1
<i>Other reformist</i>	12.7	14.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	3.4	2.2	5.1	5.9
<i>Radical Left</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.4	1.9	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.7	5.6
<i>'Anti-system' Right</i>	12.7	9.7	6.8	5.7	8.7	6.1	5.3	6.8	6.4	14.1
<i>All others</i>	2.8	1.5	1.3	1.6	2.1	0.8	2.7	3.2	2.8	5.0
<i>Maximum bloc: DC</i>	49.2	51.9	66.6	61.4	60.2	56.1	56.8	56.4	57.4	53.3
<i>PCI</i>	35.3	36.9	25.3	26.9	27.1	35.5	33.8	32.1	31.7	22.0
<i>DC - PCI</i>	17.5	19.7	13.0	12.2	11.6	4.3	7.9	3.0	7.7	13.6
<i>DC - PCI bloc</i>	4.8	5.5	13.0	12.2	11.6	3.2	4.5	0.8	2.6	7.7
<i>DC bloc - PCI bloc</i>	13.9	15.0	41.3	34.5	33.1	20.6	23.0	24.3	25.7	31.3

Sources: Ginsborg, 1990: 442; Ginsborg, 2001: 347

Three main periods can be identified. In the 1953 and 1958 elections, the DC alone has only a small advantage over the maximum possible PCI bloc, despite having an advantage of nearly 20 percent over the PCI itself; the reason for this is that the PSI is included in the ‘reformist’ category. However, even allowing for the theoretical availability of the PSI as an ally for the PCI, the maximum possible DC bloc has an advantage of 13-15 percent over the maximum PCI bloc. This is a period of DC dominance and PCI exclusion; even a theoretically possible – but never realised – alliance between the PCI and the PSI would have left the DC and its allies comfortably clear of the reunited Left.

The next three elections, with the PSI established as an ally of the DC, show a recovery in the PCI vote, a decline in the vote of the DC’s allies and

a rise in the vote of radical Left parties (represented at this point by the Partito Socialista Italiano di Unità Proletaria (Italian Socialist Party for Proletarian Unity, PSIUP), a splinter from the PSI). The vote for the DC itself holds steady throughout this period, but at a lower level than in the previous decade. As a result of these trends – all of which can be related to the initiation of the ‘centre-left’ in 1963 – the DC’s advantage over the PCI falls in this period to the 10 percent region. The isolation of the PCI by the centre-left strategy can be gauged from the 40 percent advantage of the maximum DC bloc over the maximum PCI bloc in 1963; by 1968 this advantage had fallen by 8 percent, but was still substantial. This is a period in which the vote shares of the DC and PCI begin to converge, but this is more than offset for the DC by the addition of the PSI vote.

The 1976 election sees a genuine swing to the Left: the PCI vote rises above 30 percent for the first time ever, while the votes of DC allies fall below 20 percent for the first time since 1963. From then until the 1987 elections, the vote shares of the maximum possible DC bloc remain steady, with a decline in the DC vote offset by a rise in the vote of DC allies, mainly accounted for by resurgence in the PSI vote. A parallel decline in the PCI vote is only partially offset by a rise in the vote for ‘reformist’ parties; the gap between the two ‘blocs’, which had fallen to below 20 percent in 1976, steadily widens to 25 percent in 1987, then jumps to 30 percent in 1992 thanks to the transformation of the PCI into the PDS, and the consequent split of the Partito di Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation, PRC). 1992 also sees a slump in the votes for the DC, apparently attributable to the rise of the Lega Nord.

From 1976 to 1987, the gap between the DC’s vote alone and that of the maximum possible PCI bloc is negligible. However, this convergence only exists on paper: the DC was solidly hedged about with allies throughout this period, while the PCI – and subsequently the PDS – neither sought nor desired alliances with the various leftists, libertarians and ecologists making up the ‘reformist’ category. In short, this is a period in which the PCI failed to capitalise on its mid-1970s gains, steadily losing vote share to the small reformist parties; the party’s vote share in 1987, even before the disastrous effects of the split of 1992, is below the level of 1972. Within the ruling bloc there is a discernible shift away from the DC and towards the Socialists; this period included Bettino Craxi’s two five-party governments.

Over these three periods we can trace a complex set of developments, reflecting the transformation of what was initially a heavily ideological Christian Democratic party into a self-perpetuating political machine; it is worth noting that the PCI vote rises throughout the first and second periods, and that its losses in the third period are partially compensated by gains on the part of reformist parties. But these changes all take place within definite limits. The DC vote is always higher than the PCI vote; in all but two elections the gap between the two is over 5 percent. The DC vote

only falls below 30 percent in 1992, on the eve of the earthquake, and before that had only twice fallen below 35 percent; in the same period the PCI vote had only twice risen above 30 percent and never reached 35 percent. Moreover, the vote of the maximum DC bloc (a bloc which was in government for most of the 1980s) never drops below 55 percent until 1992; in contrast, after 1962 the vote for the entirely notional PCI bloc only once exceeds 35 percent.

If the PCI were ever to form part of a government supported by a majority – or even a plurality – of Italian voters, this picture needed to change in one of two ways. The first was a straightforward shift in the balance of power, thanks to a larger-scale repetition of the general swing to the Left seen at the 1976 election; this never seemed likely and only briefly seemed possible. The second was a shift in the relative level of cohesion of the two blocs: the goal was for the PCI to weld the notional PCI bloc into a real political force commanding 35-40 percent of the vote, while at the same time the 55 percent of voters consistently supporting the DC and its allies were disaggregated into right- and left-leaning groups. Under these conditions the PCI's electoral strength would enable it to make a credible appeal to the left wing of the old DC bloc, which in turn would make it possible for a PCI-led coalition to gain power.

Needless to say, this strategy was never put into practice under the First Republic. However, it was widely advocated in different forms in the PCI in the 1970s, with the Right of the party arguing for an attempt to recall the PSI to its radical origins, while the Left proposed instead to split the DC itself, releasing its suppressed 'Christian social' tendencies. Under the leadership of Enrico Berlinguer both perspectives gave way to the Historic Compromise strategy, effectively marking the PCI's acceptance of the DC system; after Berlinguer no attempt was made to disaggregate the DC bloc. The disintegration of the DC and the emergence of a new Right pole, in the form of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, made the task of building a coherent PCI-led alliance at once more urgent and more difficult – not least because the PCI had now become the PDS and lost the voters represented by PRC.

Whether overtures to the DC bloc could be made without a move to the Right, and whether the gains made from those overtures could offset the loss in support on the Left caused by the move Right, had been theoretical questions for those debating possible alliance strategies. After the First Republic these became real and pressing questions, as Table 2 shows.

For simplicity's sake, a few retrospective assumptions have been imposed on the fluidity of the post-1992 period. The first row gives the votes for the Right pole of post-1992 politics: Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom) and its precursors, Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale (the National Alliance, AN), together with the Lega Nord, its unreliable electoral ally; in 2008 the vote for the Southern autonomists is

also included. Avowed successor parties to the DC are not included in this category. The third row gives the votes for the PD in 2008 and the Ulivo in 2006; before 2006, this category includes the vote for the PDS and its successor party the DS, together with identifiably *ulivista* centre parties or electoral lists. The second row gives the vote for all other post-DC formations, foremost among them the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e dei Democratici di Centro (Union of Christian Democrats and Centre Democrats, UDC) and its predecessors. The fourth and fifth rows give the vote for 'reformist' parties (the Radicals, the Greens, la Rete and Di Pietro's Italia dei Valori (Italy of Principles, IdV)) and for radical Left parties, mostly former splinters from the PCI.

Table 2: Vote share at Italian parliamentary elections (Chamber of Deputies), 1994-2008

	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008
<i>Right</i>	42.9	46.4	45.4	41.9	46.8
<i>DC successors</i>	18.0	12.6	5.6	9.2	5.6
<i>PD and predecessors</i>	20.4	25.4	31.1	31.3	33.2
<i>Other reformists</i>	8.1	4.4	8.3	7.0	5.4
<i>Radical Left</i>	6.1	8.6	6.7	8.1	4.2
<i>All others</i>	4.5	2.6	2.9	2.5	4.8
<i>Right with DC</i>	60.9	59.0	51.0	51.1	52.4
<i>Centre Left</i>	28.5	29.8	39.4	38.3	38.6
<i>Broad Left</i>	34.6	38.4	46.1	46.4	42.8
<i>Right – PD</i>	22.5	21.0	14.3	10.6	13.6
<i>Right – Centre Left</i>	14.4	16.6	6.0	3.6	8.2
<i>Right – Broad Left</i>	8.3	6.0	-0.7	-4.5	4.0
<i>Right with DC – Broad Left</i>	16.3	20.6	4.9	4.7	7.6

Sources: Ginsborg, 2001: 347; *la Repubblica*, 2006b; *la Repubblica*, 2008

The 'bloc' calculations are also more complex than in the earlier period. I have given aggregate figures for three potential 'blocs': a Right bloc consisting of the core Right vote together with the vote for 'DC successors', considered as potential allies of the Right; a 'Centre Left' bloc including the PD and the 'reformist' parties, analogous to the 'maximum PCI' bloc in Table 1, and a 'Broad Left' bloc including the PD, the 'reformist' parties and the radical Left parties.

Even in this brief series, two major turning-points can be identified. The key event of the period is clearly the consolidation of the Ulivo and subsequently the PD, whose effect is clear in the 2001 election. The merger takes the vote for the centre-left pole from 20 percent to above 30 percent; by the same token, the Right is deprived of a potential ally, reducing the maximum potential Right bloc from 59-60 percent to 51-2 percent. In 2006, the vote for DC successor parties and for the Left parties shows a significant increase against 2001; this is suggestive in part of centrifugal political competition within the two coalitions, but also of a genuine electoral shift to the Left prompted by the greater credibility of the PD. (For both the UDC and the Left parties to gain while the Ulivo vote held steady suggests that the Ulivo and the UDC both gained from the Right while losing votes to the Left, in a small-scale echo of the shift in DC, PSI and PCI votes between 1972 and 1976). The advantage held by a Right bloc including DC successor parties over a Broad Left bloc drops to below 5 percent in 2001 and 2006 (a fall of over 15 percent from the 1996 figure); the advantage of the Right bloc alone over the 'Broad Left' bloc goes into minus figures in 2001, with the Broad Left bloc enjoying a 4.5 percent advantage in 2006. (Of course, Prodi's real-world Left alliance did not have this advantage, as the Right bloc in this period was bolstered by the UDC).

These figures suggest a party system rapidly consolidating around a bipolar antagonism, opening the way for alternation between successive governments based on coalitions commanding between 45 and 55 percent of the popular vote. However, there are three inter-related caveats. Firstly, the 'centre' pole represented by the DC successor parties is massively diminished by the consolidation of the PD, but never eliminated. The comparison between the party systems resulting from the 2006 and 2008 elections exhibits a 'radical "defragmentation" of ... a party system usually defined as "fragmented bipolarism"' (Donovan, 2009: 118), but also suggests that the relationship between bipolarity and fragmentation is direct, rather than inverse: a decline in fragmentation at the party level was accompanied by a decline in bipolarity at the level of the bloc (Chiaromonte, 2009: 205). Until 2006, the ex-DC vote remains crucial, with neither bloc capable of reaching the 50 percent mark without it. In both 2001 and 2006, the Right bloc alone falls short of the Broad Left bloc, while the 'Right with DC' vote has a 4 percent advantage over the Broad Left. On the other hand, the vote for the 'Centre Left' bloc - the Ulivo/PD plus the small reformist parties - is strikingly consistent, registering between 38 and 40 percent in 2001, 2006 and 2008; this suggests that, without help from additional allies to the left or right (or both), the PD has no realistic prospect of approaching 50 percent of the vote. Alliance policy is crucial, in other words.

Secondly, the two poles are unevenly matched. Despite the mid-1990s dissociation of the Lega Nord from Forza Italia, and despite the far-

reaching ideological differences between the Lega and the post-Fascists of AN, the three parties can reasonably be considered a core Right bloc to parallel the Ulivo on the Left: and this core bloc has a consistent 10-15 percent advantage over the Ulivo/PD. This inevitably makes alternation between the two a challenging proposition.

Thirdly and most fundamentally, the bipolar division of the two main blocs is itself imperfect. The point here is not that bipolarity has been imposed on a multipolar reality by majoritarian electoral reforms: as I have argued, the drive for a transition to some form of political normality has become the primary cleavage in Italian politics. However, this dividing factor has the predictable, if ironic, effect of uniting those who resist it far more effectively than those who support it: one bloc includes those parties which oppose *all* the goals of the transition, coherently and consistently, while the other includes those which support *any* of them, with whatever degree of inconsistency and opportunism. Both blocs are ideologically heterogeneous, but the relative balance of heterogeneity is strongly in favour of the Right.

This is both a superficial and a fundamental problem for the Left. The superficial problem is that of maintaining cohesion among allies who share an agenda, but with differing levels of commitment to different elements of it. The centripetal pressures produced as a result are likely to promote in-fighting and trade-offs over co-ordinated and efficient government, leading to counter-intuitive outcomes such as Mastella's nomination to the Justice Ministry. The fundamental problem is that the overriding need to promote unity within a heterogeneous coalition – particularly a governing coalition with a minute advantage over its rival – effectively calls for the suspension of normal politics within the coalition. Under these conditions, an irreconcilable disagreement within a coalition risks being seen as 'systemically crucial' (to borrow Pridham's terminology), in the sense of calling the coalition itself into question.

Prodi's 2006 government provided an example of this process – and demonstrated how damaging it could be – in February 2007. The previous month, a parliamentary motion to increase the number of Italian troops in Afghanistan and double the size of a US military base met serious opposition from the left. In the Senate, two senators abstained: a member of PRC and a recently expelled ex-member of the smaller Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Party of Italian Communists, PdCI). Prodi called the Left's bluff and resigned. In the ensuing manoeuvres, the PRC group fell into line behind Prodi and expelled its dissident member: Franco Turigliatto of Sinistra Critica, which now began to organise as a party in its own right. Prodi agreed to form a second government, which obtained the confidence of both houses, and in effect picked up where he had left off.

However, while Prodi had succeeded in calling the Left into line, he had no prospect of governing without them. Even an explicit move to the

Right, rejecting the ex-Communist parties and offering an alliance to the UDC, would not have sustained Prodi in government: the PRC alone had more MPs than the UDC, so a centrist Prodi coalition (assuming this was feasible) would have immediately lost its majority. Prodi needed the support of the PRC and the PdCI, but he needed their support to be offered unconditionally; political disagreements, of the type which would normally be expected between unrepentant ex-Communists and former Christian Democrats, would be fatal to the government. This was a defeat for the ex-Communist parties, which came out of the episode looking at once recklessly extreme and weak-willed in their readiness to abandon the policies on which they had been elected. However, for Prodi it was at best a Pyrrhic victory: unable to govern without the ex-Communists, his coalition was effectively tainted with the extremism which it had ascribed to them.

The Prodi government's problems contained an odd echo of the First Republic. Within the DC bloc, too, normal politics had been suspended; there, too, unity among the broadest possible range of disparate factions was the overriding priority, to be arrived at primarily through horse-trading rather than debate. There, too, the great fear was that dissent would lead to fragmentation, which would be exploited by an irreconcilable enemy. Consequently, as Capano and Giuliani (2003: 28) noted, consensus law-making was the rule:

adversarial dynamics within parliament can only exist when the issue in question is ideologically radicalised. However, this strategy can only be pursued occasionally by Italian governments: they are coalition executives, characterised by a series of internal cleavages. As a result, they cannot continually constrain their parliamentary majority to behave passively and simply follow the executive's guidelines.

It is worth noting that PRC leader Bertinotti evoked the possibility of bringing politics back in through the use of 'variable majorities', compensating for left abstention with centre-right support (Paolucci and Newell, 2008: 287); this perspective similarly echoes the (limited) fluidity of the DC bloc, in which a programme unacceptable to a right-wing ally could be passed with centre-left support. In a highly fragmented political system, as Newell (2006: 396) notes, this type of fluidity is both normal and functional:

If each player wishes to maximise the number of his own projects he achieves, he has an incentive to support as many of the other players' projects as he can as the means of maximising his 'purchasing power' when it comes to his own projects. Therefore, most decisions will be taken by large coalitions, the only players left out being those who, for ideological and other reasons, have extreme positions on the relevant issues and are therefore unable to lend their support because it is too costly for them.

In this sense we can see Prodi's all-encompassing coalitions as prefigurative, not so much of a Left which could alternate in power with the Right, as of the entire legitimate political sphere of a post-transition Second Republic: once the system had been purged of Berlusconi's personal influence and the extreme Right had returned to 'anti-system' pariah status, Italy could be governed by 'variable majorities' centred alternately on the PD and on some post-transitional party of the constitutional Right. As we have seen, however, the PD's base never had the advantage – relative to the existing Right or to its own allies – necessary to make this a reality; maintaining coalition unity against the Right had to be the overriding priority. Moreover, Berlusconi's coalition represented a stronger, more antagonistic and more skilful adversary to Prodi's government than the PCI had ever presented to the DC; unsurprisingly, Prodi had much less success in maintaining coalition unity.

Walter Veltroni and the crisis of the Left

Held, thanks to the defection of Mastella, under a proportional electoral system, the 2008 election was nevertheless contested by individual parties rather than broad coalitions; this was essentially a result of Veltroni's unilateral decision that the PD would 'run alone'. In practice, this commitment was qualified in favour of a joint ticket with IdV and the adoption of Radical-party candidates on the PD list. In other words, Veltroni's PD was prepared to work with precisely those two 'reformist' parties which lack any Left identity.

In the 2008 election, both poles gained support (the PD 1.9 percent, the Right 4.9 percent – the latter mostly accounted for by a 3.7 percent gain for the Lega). The Right clearly gained more than the PD – all the more so when changes in bloc composition are taken into account. The centre-left bloc had expanded slightly since 2006: the Radical Party ran in 2006 as part of the Rosa nel Pugno ('Rose-in-the-Fist') alliance, taking 2.6 percent of the vote. The centre-right bloc, by contrast, had contracted slightly: the Right vote for 2006 includes 1.3 percent obtained by two neo-fascist parties, which in 2008 ran as La Destra ('the Right') and took 2.4 percent of the vote. The Right's gains in 2008 relative to 2006 can thus be adjusted upward by about 1.3 percent and the PD's downward by a similar amount, giving aggregate gains of 6.2 and 0.6 percent respectively. Among post-DC parties, only the UDC survived, with its vote reduced from 6.8 to 5.6 percent. The 'reformist' vote fell overall, but this masks a striking advance by IdV, from 2.3 to 4.4 percent of the vote. Neither the Radicals nor the Greens make a showing in this category: the Radical vote was absorbed into the PD vote, while the Greens ran as part of the Sinistra Arcobaleno ('Rainbow Left', SA): a new list, bringing together the PRC, the PdCI, the Greens and Sinistra Democratica (the Democratic Left), a Left splinter from the DS. The

parties of the SA suffered the greatest defeat of the election. The PRC, the PdCI and the Greens had taken 10.3 percent of the vote in 2006; in 2008, the three parties together with Sinistra Democratica took only 3.1 percent and failed to win any seats. (Another 1.1 percent of the vote was shared between Sinistra Critica and the Partito Comunista dei Lavoratori (the Workers' Communist Party), an earlier PRC splinter). Post-election polling showed, out of those former PRC and PdCI voters who voted in 2008, only about 40 percent of PRC voters and 20 percent of PdCI voters had remained faithful to their party, with 40 percent of PRC voters and 50 percent of PdCI voters voting PD; the remainder divided between their original party, micro-parties of ex-Communist *duri e puri* and the different anti-political appeals of IdV and the Lega (Buzzanca, 2008).

In terms of the overall configuration of the party system, the pseudo-majoritarian election of 2008 had three distinct effects; one was clearly willed by Veltroni, while the other two were at least eminently predictable. The first was an increase in political concentration: between them, the PD and the Right bloc (the newly-formed Popolo della Libertà plus the Lega and the southern Autonomists) took 80 percent of the vote, as compared with the 76.2 percent taken by the predecessors in 2006. However, as we have seen, the process of polarisation was considerably more effective for one pole than the other. Thus, the second effect was a swing to the Right. Between 2001 and 2006, as we saw above, the Ulivo vote held steady while the Right vote declined and the Left vote rose, suggesting that both the Ulivo and the UDC gained from their right and lost to their left. The reverse process is visible in 2008, with the Ulivo/PD vote rising only very slightly while the Right vote rises by 6 percent and the far Left vote loses a similar amount. The inference has to be that the PD lost votes to its right – to IdV and the UDC – at very much the same rate as it gained *voti utili* from the far Left: an alarming precedent for any future election at which the far Left was less effectively excluded.

The third effect relates to proportionality. Majoritarian electoral systems are something of a cult object among Italian enthusiasts for bipolarism: the loss in proportionality entailed by a majoritarian system is believed to be amply compensated by the unambiguous bipolarism which it delivers, which in turn is believed to be associated with greater government legitimacy and effectiveness. However, as Tables 3 and 4 show, the effect on proportionality of a majoritarian electoral system is quite different from the effect of an artificial squeeze on minority parties within a semi-proportional system, as seen in the 2008 election. Tables 3 and 4 both show the percentage of votes cast for parties, the percentage of seats obtained by them and the seat/vote ratio at two successive elections; Table 3 relates to the British general elections of 2001, 2005 and 2010, Table 4 to the Italian elections of 2006 and 2008.

Table 3: Vote share, seat allocation and seat/vote ratio at British parliamentary elections, 2001, 2005 and 2010

	2001			2005			2010		
	Vote %	Seat %	S/V (%)	Vote %	Seat %	S/V (%)	Vote %	Seat %	S/V (%)
<i>Labour</i>	40.7	62.5	153.6	35.2	55.0	156.2	29	39.7	136.9
<i>Conservative</i>	31.7	25.2	79.6	32.4	30.7	94.7	36.1	47.1	130.6
<i>Labour + Conservative</i>	72.4	87.7	121.1	67.6	85.6	126.6	65.0	86.8	133.4
<i>Liberal Democrats</i>	18.3	7.9	43.3	22.1	9.6	43.4	23.0	8.8	38.1
<i>Others with seats</i>	5.7	4.3	74.6	5.4	4.8	88.9	5.0	4.5	89.5
<i>Others without seats</i>	3.7	n/a	n/a	5.0	n/a	n/a	6.9.0	n/a	n/a

Source: Kimber, 2011

Table 4: Vote share, seat allocation and seat/vote ratio at Italian parliamentary elections (Chamber of Deputies), 2006 and 2008

	2006			2008		
	Vote %	Seat %	S/V (%)	Vote %	Seat %	S/V (%)
<i>Right</i>	41.9	37.8	90.2	46.8	54.6	116.7
<i>DC successors</i>	9.2	8.4	91.3	5.6	5.7	101.8
<i>PD and predecessors</i>	31.3	36.0	115.0	33.2	34.4	103.6
<i>Other reformists</i>	7.0	7.8	111.4	4.4	4.6	104.5
<i>Left</i>	8.1	9.0	111.1	n/a	n/a	n/a
<i>Others with seats</i>	0.6	1.0	166.7	0.5	0.7	140.0
<i>Others without seats</i>	1.9	n/a	n/a	9.5	n/a	n/a

Sources: *la Repubblica*, 2006b; *la Repubblica*, 2008

In the British majoritarian system, as we can see, between 4 and 7 percent of the vote is consistently wasted – in the sense of going to parties with no elected representative – while another 5-6 percent goes to regional and independent parties taking 4-5 percent of the seats. Plurality contests in individual constituencies result in consistent over-representation of the two main parties, Labour and Conservative; taken together, the two parties' seats overstate their total vote by between 20 and 30 percent in all three elections. In 2001 and 2005 the winning party (Labour) was substantially over-represented in Parliament, with the Conservative Party under-represented; in 2010 both parties were over-represented by a similar margin. The third party, the Liberal Democrats, suffers badly in all three

elections: the 'third-party squeeze' consistently reduces their share of representation to less than 50 percent of their vote share.

The Italian election of 2006 was the first conducted under a system combining broad proportionality with party and coalition thresholds and a 'majority premium'. In the 2006 results, the *premio di maggioranza* is reflected in symmetrical over- and under-representation: the PD, their reformist allies and the Left parties all have a seat/vote ratio of 110 percent or more, while the ratio for the Right and the DC successor parties is around 90 percent. Less than 2 percent of the vote went to parties without any elected representatives, a fairly typical figure for Italian national elections. In 2008, by contrast, the victors are rewarded with a 116 percent seat/vote ratio, but the losers are also rewarded. The PD and IdV together take 39 percent of the seats on 37.6 percent of the vote; even the third party, the UDC, has a seat/vote ratio greater than 100 percent. The reason why the electoral spoils can be distributed so generously is, of course, that nearly one in ten votes were cast for parties which fell short of the 4 percent threshold and were consequently denied any representation in Parliament. The 9.5 percent of voters whose votes were discarded include 5.2 percent who voted for parties to the Left of the PD (3.1 percent for the SA, 1 percent for the Socialist Party and 1.1 percent for the two ex-Communist parties). What Veltroni brought about was not a third-party squeeze but a fourth-party wipe-out, with a correspondingly broader, although smaller-scale, division of spoils.

Perhaps the best that Veltroni could have obtained by repeating Prodi's alliance strategy would have been an equally fractious coalition with an equally fragile majority. But what is surely certain is that the PD-alone strategy gave absolutely no prospect of winning the election. Reviewing Tables 1 and 2, taking the voting history of the period since 1992 together with that of the First Republic, it is clear that a party occupying the ideological position of the PCI has never had any prospect of gaining 51 percent of the vote in Italy. For alternation to become a reality, a new and more presentable Left party was not the only or even the primary requirement. Once the old DC bloc had been split into left, right and centre components, it was imperative for as much of that bloc as possible to be drawn into a centre-left alliance. Moreover, this alliance had to be built in such a way as to retain - or if possible regain - the votes of the far Left; otherwise the danger was that all the ex-PCI would achieve would be to move to the Right, losing votes to its left as fast as it gained them from the right (PCI, 1976: 34.4 percent; PD, 2008: 33.2 percent). In short, the party needed to combine openness to left Christian Democrats with sufficiently strong socialist commitments to keep the radical Left on side, together with a strong enough commitment to the ethical goals of the 'transition' perspective to justify an alliance with the small reformist parties.

This almost impossible three-way balancing act was what Romano Prodi had achieved, with the alliance that narrowly won the 2006 election. By setting his face against this approach, Veltroni gifted the 2008 election to Berlusconi.

Conclusion: six decades and counting?

Seventeen years into the period of 'transition' – and 61 years after the challenge of democratic consolidation first arose – the balance sheet is not hopeful. The primacy of politics is a dead letter: successive Berlusconi governments have promoted *ad personam* legislation designed to shield the Prime Minister's business interests; meanwhile, systems of corrupt exchange seem as well-established as ever, with the difference that revelations of corruption are no longer perceived as systemically threatening (della Porta and Vannucci, 2007; Allum and Allum, 2008). There is no sign of alternation becoming established. Pasquino could fairly describe the beginning of Berlusconi's second government in 2001 as the Italian political system's 'first peaceful alternation ever since 1876' (Pasquino, 2004), but one swallow does not make a summer. Five years later, Berlusconi greeted the victory of Prodi's *Unione* coalition by disputing the result, pointedly refusing to congratulate Prodi, and finally maintaining that 'they will just be an interlude, we will be in a position to render them harmless' (*la Repubblica*, 2006a). The exclusion of the Left in any shape or form seems to come as naturally to Berlusconi's governments as to their DC-led predecessors, despite occasional gestures to cross-party collaboration. Berlusconi advised his followers after the close of the Prodi interlude in 2008: 'This Left isn't fit to govern or to form the opposition ... Some of you have said that bipolarism leads to alternation in government. Alternation - what alternation? We're going to be in government for a long time' (*Corriere della Sera*, 2008).

Meanwhile, the perception that governmental failures reflect on the system itself remains endemic. Prodi's 2006-8 government was dogged by crises which were perceived as calling into question the possibility and legitimacy of a government of the left. The continued pressure for electoral reform also attests to the widespread perception, on both sides of the political divide, that systemic as well as policy reforms are needed: in the speech with which Veltroni put himself forward as candidate to lead the PD, as much attention is devoted to electoral and parliamentary reform as to tax reform (Veltroni, 2007). So far from generally supporting democratic values, Italian political culture is now characterised by two diametrically opposed readings of what constitutes support of the system, which are united only in deploring each other's influence. On the Left, Berlusconi stands accused of undermining the democratic system by reducing political culture to the level of a game show or a soap opera, a TV 'format' (Berselli,

2008); on the Right, conversely, it is argued that Berlusconi's governments have been undermined by the persistence of a 'cultural hegemony of the Left' (Tarchi 2003: 156; the phrase is quoted from the 2002 programme of AN).

The Left, and the PD in particular, has no alternative but to address the 'transition' agenda anew, from a starting position which has never been less favourable. The party at least now shows some awareness of the task facing it. In February 2009, running against Veltroni's deputy Dario Franceschini for the post of caretaker secretary of the PD, Prodi ally Arturo Parisi called for the party to turn away from 'those who led us into this swamp' (*Corriere della Sera*, 2009); he lost to Franceschini by 92 votes to 1047. Eight months later, Franceschini was defeated when party members and supporters elected Pierluigi Bersani to the secretary's post, with a plurality of votes in every region of the country (Partito Democratico, 2009). Bersani's motion, at the party congress which preceded the primaries, charges that 'the vocation for the majority has turned into nothing more than the short-cut of a political cult of the new [*nuovismo politico*]', and that 'media-based image-making has often been given priority over the definition of a recognisable political identity' (Bersani, 2009): a strongly-worded critique of Veltroni's strategy, together with a commitment to a longer and more painstaking project of building for government.

Veltroni's disastrous term as leader of the PD can now be seen as an attempt to find an exit from the political predicament to which the 'transition' perspective offers itself as a remedy. The anti-system Left would be sacrificed; the primacy of politics would be asserted through principled co-operation with the Berlusconi government when it was possible, and equally principled opposition when it was not; and alternation would be achieved, once the PD had shown the government and the country that it was worthy of it. This short-cut strategy, and the at times desperate *nuovismo* that went with it, have now been tested to destruction; Bersani's resounding victory suggests that the construction of a more coherent and viable oppositional project is beginning. Nineteen years on from the fall of the First Republic, the Italian political system is still dominated by the transition agenda and the democratic distortions which created it. The Italian Left may choose not to engage with the problematic of transition, but cannot choose to escape it.

Notes

1. The idea of political interventions by 'non-political' actors is problematic. Pridham (1990: 108) also refers in this passage to 'political actors associated with the previous authoritarian regime': 'ex-authoritarian political actors' such as the armed forces, of which it is required 'that they should precisely cease to be political

actors under the new democracy'. 'Non-political' actors, in other words, are actors who held power under an authoritarian regime and whose power base lies outside democratic politics.

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