

Editorial

Italy on the Eve of the 2013 General Elections

Maurizio Carbone and James L. Newell

The early conclusion of the Berlusconi government in November 2011 marked the beginning of a period in which the two main parties in Parliament – the Popolo della Libertà (Pdl) and the Partito Democratico (PD) – decided to work together by supporting a technocratic government led by Mario Monti. In little more than a year, as shown by Francesco Marangoni in his piece on the legislative activity of the executive, the Monti government passed a small number of reforms, in line with its limited programmatic objectives – though some of these reforms (most notably the one on the labour market) and the increased fiscal pressure on citizens (particularly the new property tax) proved very controversial. The ‘armistice’ between the two main parties lasted until early December 2012, when the PdL decided to withdraw its support for the technocratic government. This forced Monti to resign four months before the natural end of the legislature and before the completion of other planned reforms.

A period of cooperation between the main parties of government and opposition is not a novelty in Italy. During the so-called First Republic, these parties were, of course, the Democrazia Cristiana (DC) and the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI). Roberto Fornasier, on the basis of new archival material, argues that the DC was strongly supported by the various US administrations, led by both Republican and Democratic presidents – in spite of assumptions that Jimmy Carter’s election would soften US attitudes towards the PCI. Fornasier, furthermore, shows how the political and economic crisis of the mid-1970s caused a rethinking of the DC-PCI relationship. In 1978, Giulio Andreotti formed a cabinet of national solidarity, which was supported by the PCI. The glue holding the parties together until the general election of 1979 was defence of the democratic institutions from the Red Brigades.

Between November 2011 and December 2012, the common ‘enemy’ was not national terrorism, but the global economic crisis, which was putting Italy’s economic and social stability at risk. But since the resignation of the Monti government (which managed to maintain Italy’s

macro-economic stability), Italian politics has once again been characterised by the kinds of skirmishes that occurred in the period after 1994. Having announced that he would no longer take a high profile in elections, Silvio Berlusconi decided again to lead the centre-right coalition – though not necessarily as a means of seeking the position of Prime Minister. This decision was probably a consequence of the fact that, in opposition to the young and ambitious mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, PD secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, won primary elections, held in the autumn, to determine who would lead the coalition of the centre left. Given this coalition's large opinion-poll lead in the run-up to the 24-25 February 2013 elections, Berlusconi devised a strategy based on a 'spectacular presence' on TV and a number of (for many unrealistic) promises: abolition of the much-hated property tax and adoption of various measures to compensate for the economic sacrifices the Monti government had imposed on citizens to comply with the demands of the EU (or, in a more radical version, simply to please Germany).

The varying attitudes of the political parties to the European Union is a favourite theme in the literature on Italy's posture in international politics. The centre right has alternated between euro-realism and euro-scepticism. By contrast, the centre left has generally projected a positive attitude towards the EU. This is more or less also the conclusion reached by Valeria Camia in her piece on the parliamentary discourse on Europe of the PD's predecessors (the Partito Democratico della Sinistra-Democratici di Sinistra, PDS-DS) between 1992 and 2005. However, while the dominant narrative seemed to be that of an 'open and social Europe', which supported multiculturalism and economic policies that bolstered social solidarity, new evidence suggests that the perspectives of a somewhat 'closed Europe', meant to protect Italy from external threats (i.e. crime, migration, unfair competition), received some attention among the members of the main centre-left party.

But in the 2013 election campaign, traditional parties will have to face, on the one hand the increasing distrust of the people towards politics, and on the other hand the rise of unconventional political participation – which actually are the two sides of the same coin. Giovanni Barbieri points out that the scandals which in 2012 engulfed the Lega Nord and its charismatic leader, Umberto Bossi, as well as a number of his close associates, risked compromising the party's electoral appeal. Bossi was forced to resign and the new leader, Roberto Maroni, promised to tackle corruption and re-establish the credibility of the party. Thanks this, polls suggest that vote losses may be limited at least in the Northern regions. For Barbieri, however, the scandals may have meant the end of Lega's expansion in the 'red belt' of Italy. In fact, probably as a consequence of the failure of local left-wing parties to supply adequate answers to the demands of the territory and the growing concerns arising from increased immigration, in

the late 2000s the Lega had managed incrementally to expand into regions outside the areas in which it had obtained its best results.

The other major novelty of the 2013 election campaign is the MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S), led by the well-known comedian, Beppe Grillo. Appealing to citizens' distrust of politics, at the municipal elections in May 2012 and at the Sicilian regional elections in October, the M5S gained a significant number of seats (and actually won control of the council in Parma). Similarly to what Berlusconi did in the early 1990s, Grillo has presented himself as the new face of Italian political ethics against the existing corrupt elites. Taking advantage of Berlusconi's temporary absence from the political scene in 2012, he has used the democratic possibilities offered by the Internet (in fact, M5S candidates have abstained from participation in political talk-shows on TV to mark their difference from traditional political parties) and presented his movement as a new form of grassroots democracy.

More generally, over the past few decades there has been an increase in unconventional forms of participation in politics. In the view of Mauro Quaranta, this new wave of political engagement – going beyond rallies, petitions and symbolic occupations – has become a way for citizens to reject institutional politics and to search for alternative ways of governing their societies. But while Italy has experienced civil mobilisation on and off since the 1960s, more recently this has shifted from being 'citizen-oriented' to being 'cause-oriented'. Political parties have gradually lost their traditional function of aggregating and representing societal interests and unsurprisingly citizens have turned away from them to develop their own modes of influencing the political system.

It is not clear what the February 2013 general elections will hold for Italy. It is possible that no clear majority will materialise and that either fresh elections will be called or another grand-coalition will be formed. What can be guaranteed is that, as editors, we will continue to monitor how the Italian political system evolves. The *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, as a result of its success, will increase the frequency of its appearance from two to three issues per year. More importantly, it will be published by Taylor & Francis under a new name, *Contemporary Italian Politics*. Since this is the last online issue of the *Bulletin*, we would like to thank a number of people. Firstly, a special word of appreciation goes to Margaret Murray at the University of Glasgow, who has sacrificed considerable amounts of her time to help us with the layout of the journal. Secondly, thanks are due to the Italian Politics Specialist Group of the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) for its financial contributions to the journal's production costs. Thirdly, we are grateful to the contributors who have chosen the *Bulletin* as an outlet for their work and to the peer reviewers who have contributed to improving the quality of the articles that have appeared since the first issue

M. Carbone and J.L. Newell

in the summer of 2009. To all you and to our readers, we say '*Arrivederci*' until the first issue of *Contemporary Italian Politics*.