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Into the Third Republic Parties without Presidents (and Presidents without Parties)

MAURO CALISE

Should we judge from our past experience, it would be far better to avoid giving too many details about what the Italian Third Republic is going to look like. The record of the last twenty years shows that most of the expectations about the Second Republic have been turned into nightmares. Rather than a two party system reproducing the Westminster model, the land of Machiavelli – and Guicciardini – has nurtured two highly fragmented coalitions, which have, in the latest national elections, been outplayed by a third pole, the protest movement of Beppe Grillo. The result is a tri-polar system, where a parliamentary majority can only be obtained by pulling together two bitterly antagonistic parties, with very little, if any, governmental stability. In this article, I shall try to explain why the Second Republic failed to meet the expectations of the reform movement which, in the aftermath of the *Tangentopoli* scandals, strived to set Italian politics on a better track. In the concluding section, I shall outline how the main features of the emerging regime – the so-called Third Republic – reflect, as it is often the case, the poisonous legacies of the one which is falling apart. As the fire is still on, I shall handle the matter with extreme caution.

What Went Wrong with the Second Republic

The cause for the breakdown of the First Republic was rightly singled out in the crisis of the parties which had been its main pillars since Italy was born again as a democratic republic after World War Two. The two main governing parties, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, had literally been disintegrated by the indictment of its nomenclature. In 1993, almost half of the members of the Parliament were involved in some form of judicial accusation for bribes or outright corruption¹. At the same time, the major opposition party was going through a complete redefinition of its ideological coordinates, as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Italian Communist party gave up its own name, through a sudden and unexpected move which caused a dramatic split. In light of such a clear-cut discontinuity affecting the organization as well as the name of all the main parties, there could be little doubt that the priority for putting the political system back to work would consist in reforming and giving new life to the old parties. Italy had been considered, for half a century, as the stronghold of powerful parties, which represented the main pillar of the overall political system, stretching their influence well beyond Parliament into every arm of the state machinery. It could be named as *la Repubblica dei Partiti* or as "a partitocratic

¹ Luca RICOLFI, *L'ultimo Parlamento: sulla fine della prima Repubblica*, Carocci, Roma, 1993.

regime”, according to a more or less favorable attitude and valuation¹. But everyone would agree that party rule was what made the system work, for the good or the bad. So, the diagnosis was right in stating that parties were to be brought back to life, and possibly a better one.

Where the doctors, unfortunately, failed was in the prescription of the medicine. As with most fatal errors, the mistake was made in good faith and, to a large extent, for lack of a better remedy. Repeated efforts in the past calling upon the parties to self-reform themselves had been met with little if any results. So, the new medicine consisted in trying to force parties to change by introducing a majoritarian electoral law. This indeed became the main platform of the referendum movement which swept the country in the early Nineties. The recipe was – much too – simple. A majoritarian electoral law would put an end to fragmentation and lead to the forming of only two dominant parties, one for each side of the political spectrum. Both the party on the right and the party on the left would become moderate in their stance, as the competition would mainly focus on the conquest of the votes at the centre. As a consequence, the ideological bias would be replaced by a more pragmatic, policy-oriented commitment, which would further diminish distances and animosities between the two main actors.

We now know that, in spite of its noblest intentions, this plan did not succeed. To a large extent, the failure was due to the fact that the law kept smaller parties alive through the provision that one fourth of parliamentary seats be allocated on a proportional basis². In his criticism of the automatism of Duverger’s law, Sartori³ had pointed out that a bipartite outcome would be endangered by the survival of radical, non-coalitional parties. This thesis was to be fully confirmed by the role of *Rifondazione comunista* on the left and *Lega Nord* on the right in undermining the cohesion of their respective coalitions, with their blackmailing power enhanced by the existence of a PR quota which would anyhow allow for their survival.

Another unprecedented – and largely unforeseen – factor, however, strongly contributed to the failure of the Westminster model. The type of party that reformers hoped would take shape should have resembled the experience of more stable democracies, as in Germany, France or Great Britain: a large organization with a cohesive political class and a programmatic profile which would clearly distinguish it from its competitor. This kind of expectation dramatically clashed with the *discesa in campo* of Silvio Berlusconi, and his brand new *personal party*⁴. The *Cavaliere* injected an overdose of personalization into the Italian party system, in sharp contrast with the oligarchic rule which had been the key trait of party hegemony in the First Republic. With the exception of Bettino Craxi, the Italian party elite had opposed a fierce resistance to the personalization trend which had become dominant in most Western

¹ Pietro SCOPPOLA, *Repubblica dei partiti: profilo storico della democrazia in Italia (1945-1990)*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1991; Mauro CALISE, “The Italian Particracy: Beyond President and Parliament”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 109, no. 3, 1994, pp. 441-460.

² Giovanni SARTORI, “Il sistema elettorale resta cattivo”, *Rivista italiana di scienza politica*, no. 31, 2001, pp. 471-480; Stefano BARTOLINI, Roberto D’ALIMONTE (eds.), *Maggioritario ma non troppo: le elezioni politiche del 1994*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1995.

³ Giovanni SARTORI, “The Influence of Electoral Systems: Faulty Laws or Faulty Methods?”, in Bernard GROFMAN, Arend LIJPHART (eds.) *Electoral Laws and their Political Consequences*, Agathon Press, New York, 1986, pp. 43-68.

⁴ Mauro CALISE, *Il partito personale. I due corpi del leader*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2010 (2000).

– and non-Western – regimes, to the point of blurring the traditional boundaries between parliamentary and presidential systems, as it would be explained through the catchword of *presidentialization*¹. Till the advent of Berlusconi Italy had remained the main bulwark of collective party rule. Yet, when personal leadership at last struck the *Belpaese*, it did it with a vengeance.

Instead of a programmatic two-party system, Italy woke up to a fragmented bipolarism, with the only center of gravity being represented by Berlusconi overwhelming personal power, and, by converse, the opposition to him as it was loosely assembled under the banners of Romano Prodi's *Ulivo*. The Second Republic thus became a personal – and anti-personal – regime, with Berlusconi holding the stage for a whole *ventennio*. Looked in retrospect, perhaps the worst damage inflicted by Berlusconi to the leftist camp was in reviving and stirring a deep hostility to whatever form of personal leadership. While some of the big shots of the left – as Prodi and Veltroni – tried to impose themselves as the catalysts of a reaction to the *Cavaliere's* hegemony, they could never gather enough of a following within the party rank-and-file.

The refuse from the left to adapt itself to the new game of personal politics was all the more self-defeating in light of the changes occurring at the level of voting behavior, where personalization was becoming the key element driving electors to the polls. In the past, there had been three main types of motivation behind voting behavior, as first described through a successful analytical framework by Arturo Parisi and Gianfranco Pasquino². Two types reflected the different attitude towards a political party, with one stressing the ideological and socialization factors binding social groups to a given party through a solid and persistent linkage, in Parisi and Pasquino's terminology the *voto di appartenenza*. This contrasted with the *opinion vote*, which referred to the rational choice of preferring one party or another on the basis of its policy agenda. In both cases, however, the voting behavior was centered on the relationship between the voters and the party as a collective body. Quite to the contrary, the third type of voting behavior consisted in an exchange relationship – *voto di scambio* – between the elector and the elected, both taking part into a patronage or clientelistic network based on the distribution of a public good.

At the beginning of the "long adieu" to the First Republic, the prevailing expectation among the general public as well as in the closer circle of political scientists was that the *voto di appartenenza* would rapidly decline as a consequence of the withering away of the parties' ideological cleavages, thus leaving a larger portion of the electorate free to move towards the rationalistic behavior of opinion voting. The same direction would be taken by many of the clientelistic voters, mainly resident in the poorer regions of Southern Italy. As a result of cultural modernization and better economic conditions, exchange voters would also switch toward opinion voting, as a more efficient way of protecting their individual interests through a longer-term strategy. It is important to note that the diffusion of *opinion voting* was a condition for the proper working of programmatic bipartitism, as this system was based on the accurate evaluation of a set of policy alternatives by the two parties.

¹ Thomas POGUNTKE, Paul D. WEBB (eds.), *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.

² Arturo PARISI, Gianfranco PASQUINO, "Relazioni partiti-elettori e tipi di voto", in Arturo PARISI, Gianfranco PASQUINO (a cura di), *Continuità e mutamento elettorale in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1977, pp. 215-249.

It didn't take much to realize that electoral behavior was taking a quite different route from the one that reformers had envisaged. A sharp picture is offered by the analytical scheme presented by Luigi Di Gregorio, within the wider context of a hyperdictionary of major political concepts¹. In order to understand the prevailing trend which deeply modified existing voting traditions, it is necessary to add one new type of voters' motivation:

"We are referring now to the idea of 'populist vote' or 'charismatic vote', which is at present very important in several western democracies. Just think as examples on the phenomenon of the *Lega Nord* in Italy, or the Austrian Liberal party, or the Canadian Reform party, especially concerning the strictly populist vote and *Forza Italia* more as a symbol of the charismatic vote. The personalization of politics created by a frequent and instrumental use of television and new media, and which followed the crisis of ideologies (in the post-cold war period) generated the crisis and the overcoming of the mass-party, in favor of the arising of 'personal parties'². These parties are focused on the role of the leader and quite often tend to use instrumentally the popular disappointment and the will of changing the status quo, using surveys to understand which are the main issues to increase their consensus during the electoral campaign"³.

The populist/charismatic vote has proved to be the main asset in keeping Berlusconi on the winning side for almost twenty years. It perfectly matched the egocentric personality of the *Cavaliere*, as well as his extraordinary ability in framing the media agenda according to his own needs and strategy. And, needless to say, the populist appeal was an even more powerful consensus machinery when channeled through a personal party, one which would only obey and conform to the will of his founder and owner. While fuelling Berlusconi's strength, the new vote also turned out as one of the main weakness factors in the center left's attempts to gain electoral grounds. As a combination of its traditional culture and its oligarchic rule, the Democratic Party – resulting from the fusion between post-communists and the leftist faction of the Christian Democrats – had always opposed the emerging of monocratic leadership, thus finding itself unable to confront Berlusconi in what had become the fastest developing electoral arena.

If looked through the evolution of political parties, the explanation for the failure of the Second Republic must be found in the rise of personal politics in place of a rationalistic type of party government. Personalization is not a prerogative of Italian politics, and should rather be considered as an important feature of all political systems today. What is peculiar in Italy is its sudden and overwhelming rise, both at the level of party organization, with Berlusconi's personal party which set a model for several – more or less successful – imitations; and at the level of electoral behavior, where the populist/charismatic motivation became the most important.

¹ Mauro CALISE, Theodore J. LOWI, *Hyperpolitics. An Interactive Dictionary of Political Science Concepts*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2010.

² Mauro CALISE, *Il partito personale...cit.*

³ The quotation is from a longer version than the one presently published in Mauro CALISE, Theodore J. LOWI, *Hyperpolitics...cit.* See L. Di GREGORIO, "Elezioni", in Mauro CALISE, Fortunato MUSELLA (eds.), *Concetti chiave*, Apogeo-Maggioli, Milano, forthcoming, 2014.

One last very important factor needs to be mentioned which accounts for the disruptive role of personal politics: the lack of a monocratic institution, at the center of the political system, which could become the catalyst and main recipient of the personalization trend. When compared to other democracies, the Italian *Consiglio dei Ministri* (Council of Ministers, CdM) stands out for its lack of cohesion as well as effective steering capacity¹. This limit becomes all the more evident for the weakness – both institutional and political – of its President, or Prime Minister. While this is a historical legacy, dating back to the anti-presidentialist bias in the framing of the Constitution as a reaction to the recent Fascist past, it must be remembered that a set of incremental changes at the top had been taking place during the last fifteen years before the Tangentopoli breakdown². This silent revolution in the governmental structure led to a considerable increase in its normative and organizational powers. After a full-fledged dominance by both Chambers in the decision-making process – the so-called *parlamentarismo integrale*³ – the CdM became the main legislative body, by an overwhelming use of emergency bills and delegated legislation, as well as through a firmer grip over the legislative agenda in Parliament, both on the floor and in the committees.

At the same time, the government could successfully cope with its growing sphere of activity only thanks to the organizational and administrative reengineering of the executive office. The reform process, dating from the early 1980s, took a more coherent turn with the *August 1988 law 400*, and was further strengthened by a set of provisions enacted, ten years after, by the Prodi and D'Alema cabinets⁴.

It would then have only been fair to expect that, with the collapse of the party system, Palazzo Chigi would become the main decision-making body in Italy. This would have, however, required a number of final institutional changes which neither Berlusconi nor the center-left oligarchy were interested in undertaking, for different though concurrent reasons. Berlusconi was devoid of the complex institutional culture necessary to frame the further reforms necessary to provide the PM office with full-fledged autonomy and authority. In his heart, he remained convinced that the best tool for asserting his command on the system was his proprietary party: the bigger, the better. Which eventually led him to the disastrous fusion with Gianfranco Fini's *Alleanza nazionale*. He often advocated, in public, the necessity to transform Italy into a presidential republic, but did little or nothing to build the necessary alliances to turn this idea into reality. Quite to the contrary, when Massimo D'Alema, as the President of the two-chambers committee, offered Berlusconi a constitutional reform based on the French semi-presidentialist model, the *Cavaliere* responded with an outright refusal.

The refusal was all the more important as this was the one and only instance where the left had a more constructive attitude towards the strengthening of executive leadership. Its official stance remained, all throughout the Berlusconi's *ventennio*, one of stern opposition to all changes leading to a stronger premier who could count on more efficient institutional leverages as well as on direct popular legitimation. This cultural anti-presidential attitude was reinforced by the overwhelming personalistic

¹ Jack Ernest Shalom HAYWARD, Anand MENON, *Governing Europe*, OUP Oxford, Oxford, 2003.

² Mauro CALISE, *La terza repubblica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2006.

³ Gianfranco MIGLIO, "Le contraddizioni interne del sistema parlamentare-integrale", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, no. 14, 1984, pp. 209-232.

⁴ Mauro CALISE, *La terza repubblica*, cit., pp. 50-62.

role of Berlusconi, who revived fears of an authoritarian turn in the Italian politics. The result was a stubborn revival, in the center-left party, of the myth of collective rule, setting the country clock counter wise to the trend of institutional and electoral personalization which has been dominant in all major democratic –and non democratic – regimes in the past twenty years¹. When, at the polls, the myth gave way to reality, the Democratic party woke up to the most disastrous electoral results of recent Italian history. Mostly as a consequence of Pier Luigi Bersani's – the party's front-runner – choice of a low-profile leadership role, the campaign was dominated by the resurgence of Berlusconi's appeal and the explosive popularity of Beppe Grillo, a highly skilled comedian turned into the founder of a cybercratic party, which scored a quarter of the electoral votes². The outcome was a three-headed monster, that is a Parliament where a majority could only be achieved by pulling together two out of three fiercely antagonistic parties.

After Bersani's failure to create an extremely fragile bridge between the Democratic party and the M5S, the only left alternative was to form an "emergency government" which mixed together the devil and the holy water. After twenty years of deadly war between berlusconians and anti-berlusconians, the only way they could survive was to jump on the same boat. No wonder that the boat was due to a rapid wreck.

A Poisonous Legacy

While the Second Republic is, by all major indicators, dead, there is little if any insight of what the Third Republic will be like. Italy is in a condition of total political and institutional disarray. On the right, Berlusconi's personal party has gone through a dramatic split, loosing its moderate and pro-government wing. On the left, the Democratic party is having a hard time keeping its various factions together, and it's going through a very uncertain organizational turnover. Grillo and its web-based movement are doing their best to push whatever is left of a working political system beyond a breakdown point. The only pillar which is presently left to the country is the Presidency of the Republic, which has been forced, in the past seven years, to stretch its interventions to the limits of its constitutional powers. By so doing, it has inevitably become the target of bitter attacks by both Grillo and Berlusconi, which will make it harder, for the future, to perform the exceptional role it has played up to now.

The situation has been rendered, if possible, even shakier by the sentence of the Supreme Court declaring the electoral law unconstitutional, thus leading the Parliament to a deadlock. Calling for new elections can only happen if a new electoral law is voted, but, for the past five years, no agreement could be found among the major parties on this decisive issue. It is only fair to predict that, if a deal will be at last struck, it is likely to produce an even worse law than the present one.

While any short-term prediction is, at this point, little more than wishful thinking, the longer-term picture stands out as an act of indictment for the party elites. Their main responsibility and historical failure has consisted in the refusal to adapt the party organization to the dominant trend of personalization of the institutional and

¹ Fabio BORDIGNON, *Il partito del capo. Da Berlusconi a Renzi*, Apogeo-Maggioli, Milano, 2014.

² See Fabio Bordignon and Luca Ceccarini's article in this issue.

the electoral arenas. On the right, the problem was bypassed through the Berlusconi's shortcut. The personal party looked at first as a very successful solution, but one which could only be achieved by putting the party into the private – as well as mortal – hands of his founder. Once Berlusconi's cycle has expired, the right is bound to find itself without a party: a loose aggregation of notables with little if any working and stable party machinery. On the left, the issue of personalization was – with a few relevant exceptions – turned into the main ideological enemy of the party oligarchy. With the disrupting result of weakening the party leadership as well as its hold on the electorate. While, at the same time, contrasting any consistent attempt to strengthen monocratic rule at the institutional level¹.

The thesis, put forward seven years ago, that the Third Republic would revolve around the confrontation between parties and presidents may, in retrospect, sound as a prophecy. Which, yet, has been – one may say – overfulfilled. At the moment, there seems to be not much of parties left. As for the Presidents, it's a miracle that the *Capo dello Stato* is surviving to his own first term. And still holding in his hands the thread of the survival of the Italian republic.

¹ Mauro CALISE, *Fuorigioco. La sinistra contro i suoi leader*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2013.

