

"Grillismo" and the Powerful Forces

Judith Harris (June 11, 2012)



According to the pollsters, Beppe Grillo's share of the Italian electorate amounts to 16%, while Silvio Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà continues to sink like a stone. Meanwhile, the political pundits are suggesting that Mario Monti's government might not last beyond this summer, precipitating elections at least six months ahead of schedule.

ROME - The pollsters are now putting [Beppe Grillo](#) [2]'s share of the Italian electorate at 16%, putting his popularity among voters almost on a par with that of Silvio Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà (PdL), which continues to be sinking like a stone. The sometime comic cum fulltime politician Grillo is so successful these days that, when Berlusconi launched his idea that Italy should dump the Euro and start printing its own money again, the comments were more on the side of hilarity than outrage. Here's just one: "So now we have the 75-year-old Berlusconi trying to out-Grillo the 70-year-old Beppe Grillo, which - if anyone had doubts - is proof that Italy is truly a gerontocracy."

This would be part of the picturesque, picaresque quality of Italian political life save that Premier



Mario Monti - whose invocations of financial rigor have Grillo calling the ever-sober Premier "Rigor Montis" - announced solemnly Wednesday night in a video conference with a banking group in Palermo that he has lost the support of the national association of manufacturers, Confindustria now under the leadership of Giorgio Squinzi, and of the powerful, business-oriented Milan-based newspaper Corriere della Sera.

Monti's carefully chosen words had the political pundits leaping out of their easy chairs, for they suggest that the Premier is throwing in the towel and that, hence, his government may not last beyond this summer, precipitating elections at least six months ahead of schedule. In the largest sense, should this shift precipitate new elections before a new and more fair election law is written (and there is no talk of revising the notorious "porker law", the Porcellum), there will be more trouble ahead.

Monti is frustrated because his government's ambitious project to revive the economy, drafted by Development Minister [Corrado Passera](#) [3], was trounced by Monti's own Treasury Minister on grounds of lack of funds. This humiliation was followed by Monti's unexpected appointments of leading bankers to take over the top two slots of the state radio-TV network RAI. As one commentator objected, "The whole government is made up of bankers, and these two are so remote from daily life that they probably don't even own TV sets."

On Tuesday, the Monti government will face a crucial vote of confidence over its anti-corruption draft legislation. "If we don't win the confidence vote, the government will just go home," Justice Minister Paola Severino, author of the bill, said flatly. No party seems above the accusations of corruption, not least the Northern League, whose Senator from Turin, Enrico Montani, is under investigation for "aggravated corruption" in a case that already brought about the resignation of Monti's Junior Minister for Justice Andrea Zoppini.

Severino's aggressive statement, which can hardly have come without Monti's prior knowledge, was partly in reaction to Parliament's vote to disallow one of its rather blatantly corrupt right-wing senators to go on trial. Based upon official party statements, the senator would lose his immunity, but when the secret ballots were counted, they told another story. The vote granting the senator immunity amounted to protecting a corrupt status quo, possibly in a swap for a similar vote due next week, when Parliament must again vote for or against lifting the immunity, in this case for a leftist politician accused of appropriating public funds for his personal use, which included setting up a massive account in Canadian banks.

The anti-corruption bill was presented initially by Minister Severino in February, when she predicted it would be passed "within 15 days." As its watered-down version now reads, the maximum time limit before application of the statute of limitations is only 10 years (originally it had been 15). Nor would it be a crime, as it was before the Berlusconi era, to give a falsified balance sheet. Corruption between two private individuals or their companies is punished by a mere one to three years.

Confindustria leader Squinzi formally denies that his organization no longer supports Monti, telling a group of young businessmen on Friday that, "No, honestly I think that the moment is so difficult - we have so many worries - absolutely, I don't think that this is the time to be tendentious. We support everything that the Government can do to get the country's development back on track. Monti can count on our full support."

So are both Premier Monti and Minister Severino merely sending up trial balloons? More likely, Monti has reason to suspect that Confindustria, with the backing of the newspaper, have already begun to consider replacing Monti's with a more highly politicized and forceful cabinet. The most likely candidate for Premier would be Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, the businessman whose personal think tank (and proto-party organization) called [Italia Futura](#) [4] has excogitated that it could appeal to up to 15 million voters. His supporters say that Montezemolo's so-called "foundation" is a "meeting-place for bipartisan intellectuals, businessmen and managers who are disappointed with our half-caste bipartisan system; of young professionals who'd like to enter politics; of citizens with a desire to make policies.... It is present in every region, and is now selecting its leadership class and considering potential candidates for a civic list. With 50,000 members it is elaborating its political platform, whose key is the reform of the state and the launching of a costituente [charter for a Third



Republic]. The end of the Second Republic opens brand new space for new entries in the political arena."

If Montezemolo pulls it off, his most likely first ally will be former Premier Silvio Berlusconi himself. Behind the scenes Berlusconi is actively seeking a new role, after more or less abandoning his failing PdL in the hands of an increasingly sidelined Angelino Alfano. And behind Tuesday's vote looms the shadow of Berlusconi, who once admitted to the late journalist Indro Montanelli that, "If I don't go into politics, I'll be sent to jail for debts."

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