

ROME> A Meeting of the Mind(er)s: Monti and Napolitano

Judith Harris (December 17, 2012)



The four possible scenarios for the Italian Premier

ROME - After a four-hour meeting at the Quirinal Palace, President Giorgio Napolitano and the once and perhaps future Premier Mario Monti shook hands, but without any formal statement that would let Italy, not to mention the rest of Europe, know Monti's future plans. Monti himself is said to be troubled and uncertain as to what is the wisest course, and this was today's agenda, with the two expected to discuss four possible scenarios.

Because this is the most crucial political decision to be taken before year end, here are the options, one by one:

1. Monti was given an extraordinary welcome at last week's meeting of Euro leaders in Brussels, where he was praised him to the skies, and begged to run for premier in national general elections, expected to be held in mid-February, two months ahead of schedule. If Monti heeds their pleas to run



as a candidate to succeed himself, he is likely to have the support of the Catholic Centrists around Pier Ferdinando Casini; the moderates around the Chamber President Gianfranco Fini; the businessmen behind industrialist and political activist Luca Cordero di Montezemolo; the top authorities of the Italian Catholic Church; and even - it is surmised - a significant chunk of the Members of Parliament who support Florentine Mayor Matteo Renzi over Bersani himself, and hence Monti. The Italian bishops council (CEI) is openly plumping for Monti, a Catholic who attends mass regularly with his attractive, middle-aged wife Elsa Antonioli Monti, head of the women's section of the Red Cross in Milan and deeply committed to work in other charities. Monti protected Church interests in a revised tax law. Skeptics add that the reason for the bishops' support of Monti is to block the secular leftist Pier Luigi Bersani.

2. Monti could decide to remain entirely out of the fray in exchange for an almost certain election for president of Italy to succeed Napolitano; the sole other candidate who can challenge him is Romano Prodi. Monti in the Quirinal Palace is the scenario favored by Bersani, who said this explicitly to Monti himself in a meeting December 15, according to the respected commentator Marco Politi, writing in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. Monti's reply, which was quoted in the Italian Church daily *L'Avvenire*, tended to the negative, however: "There is work to finish, for which I feel responsible. The reforms have to go into port." "I was there and I heard the conversation," says Politi. Bersani favors a Monti succession to Napolitano for a half dozen reasons. Even though Bersani's Partito Democratico (PD) is almost certain to cop the greatest number of votes at an election, Monti's running independently would make formation of a governing coalition more difficult. The outcome could well be a duel between Monti and Bersani.

3. Monti could be the candidate for premier backed by none other than former premier Silvio Berlusconi. This was the suggestion of Berlusconi himself, saying, "If Mario Monti is a candidate and holds together the moderates of the center-right, guaranteeing them victory, then I would be disposed not to be a candidate." At the same time he also suggested two as a candidate for premier the long-suffering secretary of his Liberty Party (PdL), Angelino Alfano. In any case Monti declined to head what would be a center-right coalition in no uncertain terms. The offer was made during the presentation December 12 of a book by Bruno Vespa. Berlusconi spoke vigorously for an hour but rambled and contradicted himself, to the point that skilled observer Massimo Franco, editorial writer for *Corriere della Sera*, sentenced, "Never had I seen such a state of confusion." This was not the only confusion at the presentation, where the book had the least of it. When the auditorium was full, three young demonstrators dressed as mummies appeared bearing placards that quoted some of Berlusconi's own words. While some observers thought this was a skillful satire, others thought it was in solidarity with Berlusconi, as in "We are all mummies."

4. With the backing of the PD, Monti could be premier for a time under Bersani's tutelage. In a campaign the PD would benefit from Monti's prestige and then, in exchange for a speedy boost upstairs into a senior post in Brussels, Bersani would replace him. At the moment, however, the PD's grand old man Massimo D'Alema is furious with Monti, whom he accuses of failing to support the party which has been, throughout the past difficult year, Monti's strongest and most loyal ally. D'Alema is not the only one to share this resentment of an allegedly ungrateful Monti.

For the moment it is still wait and see, but, hinting at his intentions, Monti said, "I shall never be a man taking only one side, I will never be a member of any party or of any political ideology."

Others playing the waiting game are those already jumping ship from the PdL. They include many of Gianfranco Fini's former allies in the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale, who had fused with the PdL, but also a delegation of PdL loyalists disappointed at their party's cancellation of primary elections. Among the angriest: the PdL's young firebrand Giorgia Meloni, whose reaction was to announce she is creating her own party. The motivation: the PdL's shrinking in the polls from 38% to a mere 15%.

Elsewhere there is also dissension. In Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), heretics are being banned, and criticism of his autocratic methods is mounting. Gabriele Martini of the daily *La Stampa* of Turin interviewed 120 of Grillo's future MPs - "i Grillini" - and found them "ready for a good fight and chomping at the bit, but with rather confused ideas." Examples he cited: let's have the United States of Europe right now, but no, better Italy outside the Euro. We have to solve the problem of public debt by cutting costs, but, no, we can just not pay it. The tax on houses [a luxury



tax of sorts] should be abolished, but, no, it should be kept. His interviewees were from all over Italy and every walk of life.

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