



Dear Diary, It's Election Time

Judith Harris (February 10, 2013)



Good grief, the Italian national general elections are only two weeks away, and things are happening so thick and fast that the only way to keep up is with a daily diary of the goings-on.

ROME.

Monday - On his nationwide hustling "Tsunami Tour", Beppe Grillo is in Parma, where 4,000 people turn out to applaud him as he harangues in the piazza. Knocking his style is easy, but Grillo now commands the third largest following of any individual save for Pier Luigi Bersani on the left and Silvio Berlusconi on the right. Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) is a protest platform - and indeed he is the only party leader out on a real platform as opposed to a TV stage. Not coincidentally, although his campaign schedule is daunting, he dodges debates, including on TV - but then he does not need them. His peppy showman presence and righteous indignation appeal to people of every age, as can



be seen on the videos and on the TV stations which willingly relay his every shouting appearance. In his delivery he mocks Berlusconi with words like these: "He'll take away the IMU [property tax] and give you a set of kitchen pans. To believe in Berlusconi is like believing in fairies." In turn, Berlusconi mocks not Grillo but Bersani, whom he imitates with the Grillo-like skill of a born comic.

Tuesday - They used to kiss babies but now the politicians cuddle dogs. Monti's American spin doctor reportedly has suggested that the candidate known as the "icy professor" become more cuddly. As a result, his wife is apparently being dragged into the campaign, although she'd initially opposed his running. And so is a foundling dog named Trozzi, photographed while being clutched in the professor's arms. Berlusconi could do no less so now he too is being photographed fondling a foundling named Vittoria, given him by animal lover Michela Vittoria Brambilla. Could Bersani not participate? Come on, pose with the puppy: he did, with two dogs, not one. "Yes we cane," people are joking, cane meaning dog. Politics is a dog's life. (For a satirical version, see [>>](#) [2])

Wednesday - Bersani has just thrown the door open to outgoing emergency Premier Mario Monti. "We are ready for cooperation with all the forces opposed to Leghismo [the Northern League], Berlusconismo and populism. And certainly with Professor Monti." Finally! The offer is formally spelled out for the first time. If we can believe the polls, then, a coalition Monti-Bersani plus Nichi Vendola would be truly strong and outwit the right, no matter how well Berlusconi does.

Thursday - Oh dear, Bersani's offer has put the cat among the pigeons. "The center-left is incompatible with the centrists," Vendola declares, meaning Monti and his allies, who enjoy the support of the Roman Catholic Church as well as some of Italy's big business magnates. Bersani is still expected to deliver the most votes, but Berlusconi's bouncing up in the polls is making him nervous. Bersani can govern only with a coalition, so is he to be forced to choose between Vendola and Monti? Monti insists: "He [Bersani] has to choose." Bersani's response is negative and plain spoken: "Our group [i.e., Vendola and Bersani] is untouchable," and "We are ready for a dialogue, but not at any price."

Antonio Ingroia, the leftist magistrate who is himself running with a support group estimated at 4-5%, for once praises Bersani for (at least apparently and at least for now) choosing to stay faithful to his ally Nichi Vendola, this country's most prominent gay party leader. But a savvy TG La7 commentator accurately dubs this "a tug of war" that's leading into a "stall." Once votes are counted, will the stall spill over into formation of a government, and then into government itself? Some pessimists are mumbling about these elections becoming a prelude to a second election.

Friday - Gosh, the week is gone and today is the last day before elections when public opinion surveys can still be published. How much of a loss is this? Although most involve a thousand or so interviews, the polls are something of a hit-or-miss operation because they rely upon "computer-assisted telephone interviewing" computer usage, which becomes patchy, depending upon the territory. In addition, especially because it is by phone, not everyone replies truthfully. A third possibility is that some polls may be manipulated to show a surge, in hopes of creating a bandwagon effect. As a result, "If you ask who'll win, our answer would be 'Nobody,'" says engineer Mirco Giubilei of Mondo Informazione, speaking of the risk of a failed election that would require another. (see [>>](#) [3])

To the extent that these final surveys are accurate, they show that the Bersani coalition, which includes Vendola, leads by 6,5% over the Berlusconi group. However, although the PD on its own has 30% - more than any other single party - pollster EMG says that Bersani's coalition, with 35%, has dropped a percentage point over last week, meaning that it may shed more followers. Monti's centrist group, too, has dropped slightly, to 14%.

Berlusconi's PdL has 20% and its partner, the Northern League, 5%. The entire center-right coalition, then, which includes a couple of miniscule action parties, has risen to 28.5% - close enough to please many and to scare others. Finally, all on his own, Beppe Grillo, whose future role remains an incognito, solidly occupies 16%, up 1.5% over a week ago while that other protest candidate, Ingroia, has dropped to 3.5%, down 1% over just last week.



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