

Angelino Alfano: "The House on Fire"

judith harris (April 02, 2013)



Right and left in Italy agree on the gravity of the problem. "The house is on fire," thundered Angelino Alfano, titular secretary of the rightist Freedom Party (Pdl). "Italy is starting to be frightened - yes, frightened," intoned the moderate leftist professor Ernesto Galli della Loggia, writing in *Corriere della Sera*. Both lament the politicians' failure to move toward formation of a new government. But there agreement ends, and the impasse over what to do to avoid a dangerous power vacuum continues. Fighting to gain time as the end of his mandate approaches, President Giorgio Napolitano has appointed a 10-man committee of "sages" to try to excogitate points of convergence on reforms.

ROME -

Right and left in Italy occasionally agree, at least on the problem. "The house is on fire," thundered Angelino Alfano, titular secretary of the rightist Freedom Party (Pdl), whose real leader is former Premier Silvio Berlusconi. "Italy is starting to be frightened - yes, frightened," intoned the moderate



leftist Ernesto Galli della Loggia, writing in *Corriere della Sera*. Both lament the politicians' failure to move toward formation of a new government, consequent to the impasse wrought by the three-way split in national general elections of five weeks ago. But there agreements end, and the impasse over what to do continues, despite the risk of a power vacuum that could open the way to dangerous speculation. To gain time, President Giorgio Napolitano, approaching the end of his seven- year mandate, has tried another tack, by appointing a 10-man committee of "sages" to work this week in a last, desperate attempt to excogitate points of convergence on reforms that could - at least in theory - constitute a platform for a new government.

The stalemate was brought about by the tri-party split pitting PdL, the left- leaning Partito Democratico (PD) and Beppe Grillo's aggressive 5-Star Movement (M5S) against each other. So far the first and only attempt to form a government was a soft mandate President Napolitano gave Pier Luigi Bersani, head of the PD. But after a week of futile talks Bersani had to throw in the towel on Easter eve. His frustration was visible, to the point that he said that he would, if it would benefit the nation, stand aside.

Even more than the truculent Beppe Grillo, who refuses to cooperate with anyone, just now PdL maneuvers therefore occupy center stage. Berlusconi's people have placed an ultimatum. Either new elections are to be held now, though only if Napolitano would resign (he has declined; and in fact, elections cannot take place within the final six months of a presidential term, as this is now), or a broad coalition government is to be voted into office. The idea is that it would be headed by their leftist rivals the PD, in a swap for the PdL's choosing a president of Italy to succeed Napolitano when a joint session of parliament convenes April 14. To this offer, however, Bersani replied Tuesday in a single word: "Unacceptable." Bersani finds himself in a Catch-22 situation, for as knows, his party backers would desert the PD for Beppe Grillo if he accepted to govern in coalition with Berlusconi. As for calling new elections, this is "a disastrous hypothesis."

Ezio Mauro, who is editor-in-chief of the daily *La Repubblica*, is convinced that behind PdL strategy is a single focus: guaranteeing immunity from further prosecution for Berlusconi himself. Berlusconi himself, says Mauro, oscillates between appearing the statesman, as he did after leaving the Quirinal Palace and his talks with President Napolitano, and playing to the more radical mass of his piazza supporters on the right. The problem here, according to Berlusconi's supporters, is that this leaves Parliament frozen. "It's Napolitano's coup d'etat," according rightist editor Alessandro Sallusti of *Il Giornale*, a newspaper that belongs to Berlusconi's brother. "The constitution has been shredded" by the President's appointing the committee of "sages."

Chiming in, needless to say, is Beppe Grillo, whose blog says that the country needs a functioning Parliament rather than "phantom negotiators" or "babysitters for democracy" (i.e., the so-called sages). According to the most recent surveys, however, Grillo has lost a slice of his consensus, largely because of his centralization over control of his movement. This would hardly be surprising; it is, after all, by definition anarchic as a movement. At the same time Bersani has dropped in public opinion polls by about 2%, leaving Berlusconi's PdL the beneficiary. Why are we not surprised?

Mario Monti, in the meantime, continues to head the emergency government that held the Italian economy together for 13 months or so, until the new national general elections in late February ratified his weakness as a political figure, and generated the present stalemate, which coincides with unemployment approaching 12% and a 36% for youth.



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