

Rome: Champagne Corks and Chunks of Mortadella Mark Government's Collapse

Judith Harris (January 27, 2008)



Is Italy heading towards new elections and maybe, with the possible victory of Mr. Berlusconi, yet another round of government by telemarketing?

ROME - In a vote of confidence Thursday night the center-left government which has ruled Italy for the past two years sank like a stone. The climate was such that, the minute the decisive vote was announced in the Senate, at least one right-wing senator celebrated by spitting at an adversary while others among the gleeful victors popped Champagne corks and, as an insult, chomped on slabs of mortadella. Clanging his bell loudly to restore order, Senate President Franco Marini burst out, "This is not a tavern!"

And yet the coalition headed by Romano Prodi, the cycle-riding premier whose opponents razz him for eating that sausage specialty of his native Bologna, mortadella, had fared almost surprisingly well only the day before, when the confidence vote in the Chamber of Deputies showed 226 in favor and 175 against. Nevertheless the Prodi coalition lost the vote in the Senate by a narrow margin, 161 versus 156. Prodi immediately resigned, and on Friday President Giorgio Napolitano launched consultations over what is to be done.

What indeed? The most likely outcome is a prolonged crisis that will end in the calling of new



elections in April. If you are placing bets, go ahead and place them on a Silvio Berlusconi clan victory, for yet another round of government by telemarketing. However, President Napolitano is known to be notably reluctant to call elections, so before this happens there will be one or two rounds of attempts to form a government by premier-designates, who will try and most likely fail. Possible choices for an ad interim government of technicians to tend the store for a time—such as have been appointed any number of times in the past—include prestigious outsiders such as former European Commissioner Mario Monti and the banker/economist who has been governor of the Bank of Italy for the past year, Mario Draghi.

Admittedly, dissatisfaction with the center-left's squabbling, faltering performance has been building for many months, but meantime, it's fair to ask just how Prodi could have won by no less than 51 votes in the Chamber, and yet have lost in the smaller Senate because of two senators changing their vote.

One reason for the good showing in the Chamber is because, under a new electoral law, the victor receives a premium of extra MP's. This controversial law was a last-minute bequest from Silvio Berlusconi. Shortly before his conservative "House of Freedom" coalition was ousted two years ago, the controversial election law was shoved through with some hair-raising provisos that have contributed to the present government crisis. That new election law had an extremely low threshold of only 2% for small parties to enter Parliament; those hoping to reduce the number of tiny parties had asked for 4% or 5%. This allowed a relatively large number of micro-parties.

In addition, these tiny parties won a premium of extra representation (i.e., more MP's) at the expense of the larger ones. "The big winners were penalized while the losers were rewarded," said the sardonic Senator Antonio Polito of the new Partito Democratico, headed by Walter Veltroni.

Then the number of micro-parties was further expanded, after the two houses of Parliament were seated, by self-appointment, to the point that, at last count, 38 parties, among them Lamberto Dini's three-member formation, were represented in the now-defunct Parliament. "A few friends would chum together, name their party and—without that party's ever facing an electorate—they would then obtain Parliamentary perks: funding, office space, an official car, a secretary, the right to consultations with the other party secretaries, attention from the TV cameras...." said Polito in a meeting with foreign journalists Friday.

The law also overturned the old system of indicating individual preferences. This rescinding of the voters' right to choose individual candidates boosted the power and control of the party bosses immeasurably. The process was for party leaders to compile a roster of names, and, depending upon how many votes the party won, their candidates automatically entered Parliament, starting from the top of the list chosen by the bosses in the proverbial smoke-filled back room.

A national referendum to overturn this law was in the works, but that referendum would end automatically with the calling of new elections. Nor can Parliament rewrite the election law in the meantime, for the government's resignation limits its powers to ordinary management until a new government is in office.

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