

All at Sea, but Not Sinking

Judith Harris (July 27, 2013)



One of the more polite metaphors Italian pundits are using these days to describe the political parties - all of them - is "all at sea." Within the Partito Democratico (PD), larger of the parties composing the government, quarrels have broken out over rules for a forthcoming national congress and proposed constitutional reform. Behind some of the tension in that party is the debate over the future role of the popular young mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who heads one party faction. But premier Enrico Letta remains at the helm, and even more popular than Renzi.



ROME - One of the more polite metaphors Italian pundits are using these days to describe the political parties is "all at sea." And so they are, but few as much at sea as the Partito Democratico (PD). The largest single political party in Italy, writes columnist Claudio Tito in the progressive daily *La Repubblica*, "is having a panic attack." A sign of the tense times: an internal PD debate this week over proposed revisions of the constitution that turned so heated that the debate has just been postponed until September.

Party leaders are quarreling daily over a dozen other internal issues, beginning with who, prior to a forthcoming national congress, is entitled to have a vote. Who is to be entitled to vote in the primaries which will precede the party's planned national congress, theoretically scheduled for November - solely official registered party members or others committed to the PD in other ways? That is still undecided, as is the precise congress date. But, as acerbic columnist Curzio Maltese scathingly remarked, it is pitiful that the PD is presently unable even to name that convention date.

PD leaders, moreover, remain at odds over whether or not the individual who will be elected party leader, when the convention is eventually held, can also serve as premier. At present this dual role is disallowed, and in May the then PD chief Enrico Letta was obliged to resign as party secretary in order to become premier, and was succeeded by Guglielmo Epiphani.

By contrast with the well meaning but fairly bland trade unionist Epiphani, behind some of the disarray is the undiminished status and appeal of the party faction led by the youthful, dynamic Florentine mayor Matteo Renzi. If the young Turks within the PD win, Renzi stands a fair chance to succeed Epiphani - a possibility which helps to explain why there is such vehemence in trying to bar a future secretary from serving as both party secretary and premier, for Renzi might then be both party boss and premier. Many in the PD, and especially its younger supporters, would like to see Renzi be just that, and they are the ones calling for open primaries in defiance of Epiphani.

Even those who admit to doubts about Renzi's limited experience believe that his main role would be to bounce out the old guard, still redolent with nostalgic former Communists and trade unionists locked into bygone economic models, in order to give the PD the new look many feel it needs. As one left-leaning columnist pointed out, Renzi is also the only one on the left who can slam the door definitively on the twenty-year era of Berlusconi power. But Renzi is opposed by the majority PD leadership, which, as one conservative analysts pointed out, "has declared war on him." In an angry (and typical) tweet, Senator Andrea Marcucci, of the Renzi faction, retorted that, ["PD] headquarters have already forgotten the shellacking they took at the last elections, and are setting themselves up for another one."

In any primary vote, Renzi and Letta would face off head to head. According to veteran pollster Renato Mannheimer [see <http://www.liquida.it/renato-mannheimer/>], at present Enrico Letta's popularity rating has surged from the 59% of mid-May to the current healthy 62%. Renzi, however, stands only one point behind, and is favored today by 61% of the Italian queried by Mannheimer. As Mannheimer also points out, this high degree of consensus for both men is unusual in Italian politics. Otherwise consensus behind the government is low, at a feeble 38%. The sole exception is Foreign Secretary Emma Bonino of the tiny Radical party who, at 60%, is nearly as well liked as both Letta and Renzi.

This low standing for the government as a whole reflects dissension caused by its mixed and sometimes contradictory composition of Berlusconi's PdL and Letta's PD. Ignoring the tensions between the two, however, Letta staunchly defends his party's actions within the government, saying that his team is working toward realization of a few key goals: funding an increase in employment through investments of well over one billion dollars (€1.5 billion); a crack-down on links between organized crime and government on every level; commitment to resolve the tough situation of those in their fifties and sixties [the *esodati*] who have lost their jobs before entitlement to a pension; and promulgation of a law prohibiting what he calls "self-recycling."

In toughing it out with its rightist coalition partner, Letta's PD won no minor victory when it struck down a sneaky PdL clause, stealthily introduced into a bill over party financing, that would have disallowed prison sentences for those convicted of corruption in the form of secretly passing public funds to outsider companies in a hidden swap for favors.



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