It could just be that, at long last, we can see the prospect of a left government in Italy

Donald Sassoon

Christian Democracy's Crumbling Edifice

The recent Italian elections and the unexpected collapse of the Christian Democrats' vote have reawakened interest in Italy. The focus of attention, however, tends to be the rapid succession of governments since the war. This has been taken as a textbook case of the evil of coalitions and the disastrous consequences of proportional representation. At least superficially the data seem to confirm this impression: well over forty governments have succeeded each other, one every 10-11 months. The longest was the third Moro government of 1966-68 (833 days) but some have collapsed after a couple of weeks producing the highest rate of government instability in Western Europe. As soon as we investigate a bit deeper into what seems a bizarre way of running a country we encounter a paradox: Italy is an unusually stable country. It is the only country in Western Europe which has constantly given a single party, the Christian Democrats (DC) the largest number of votes and kept it in office year in year out. The DC has produced — with a couple of exceptions — all prime ministers. The continuity in personnel at cabinet level rivals that of the USSR. High government instability thus coexists with great continuity of parties in power. Even after the recent electoral defeat the DC is certain to form the next government with the Socialist Party (PSI) and the other parties of the centre.

How does the DC rule?
Since the war Italy has had only three types of ruling coalition all led by the DC:
1 Governments of 'national unity' supported by the PCI and the PSI (1945-1947 and 1976-9).
2 Centrist coalitions with the Republicans, the Social Democrats and the Liberals (1947-62 and 1970-2).
3 Centre-left governments of DC, PSI and the centrist parties at all other times.
Since 1972 the centrist coalition has not been able to obtain a majority in
Parliament, thus the alternatives are much more clear cut: either a coalition with the PCI or one without, the centre-left. At the centre of this Copernican system stands the DC whose dominant position rests principally on two conditions:

1. A systematic colonisation of social and economic life through the extension of the state, the growth of public spending and the concurrent creation of a diffuse system of patronage and clientele (the Italian 'welfare state').

2. A legitimacy backed by international treaties (NATO and the EEC) sustained by popular support (in which the Church had originally played a decisive role) and inscribed in an ideology of anti-communism.

These two factors enabled the DC to operationalise its hegemony at the government level in the following manner: it was the DC and only the DC which could define the acceptability and hence the legitimacy of other parties. In other words it was the DC who decided which were the parties who were 'democratic' enough to be coalition partners. Since 1947 the DC has succeeded in defining the PCI as not legitimate to be a government party even when it was forced to appeal to the PCI for parliamentary support in 1976.

As can be seen the conditions of rule of the DC are similar to those of the social-democratic state: to achieve redistributive policies and hence social-democratic state: to achieve productive policies and hence social-democracy. The political cycle which coincided with the period of CDU rule in Germany and Tory rule in the UK. In the 60s the rate of growth subsided, modernisation was on the agenda in Britain (Wilsonism), in Germany (Grossekoalition and Willy Brandt), in France (De Gaulle's plans) and in Italy where the DC 'legitimised' the PSI, split it off from the PCI, formed the Centre-Left coalition and expanded the public sector to new heights.

The 1970s marked the end of the great hopes of modernisation. The loss of US hegemony was manifest. Terms of trade between North and South began to change. Large multinational companies began to decentralise their production outside Europe and North America. Domestically in most West European countries the machine of the Welfare state found it increasingly difficult to cope with low growth rates. New social groups emerged trying to break into the triangular system of corporatist negotiations which was a feature of the de facto government of the countries of Western Europe.

The DC can't be Thatcher

The DC could not play the neo-conservative card. A rigorous control over public expenditure, welfare cuts and monetary stringency — the Thatcher option — would bust open its own system of clientele and patronage. The DC had created a welfare state and a public sector whose personnel was and is in practice its own party personnel. The party had identified itself with the state. The DC is a social-democratic party with a leaning for a soviet-type system. The crisis of the social-democratic state (ie, of the welfare state) is the crisis of Christian Democracy. The Communist Party had recognised the fact that in order to establish its own legitimacy as a government party it had to force the DC to abandon its discrimination against the PCI. The historic compromise was the instrument of this strategy. The PCI accepted that it was not possible to rule Italy without coming to terms with the popular masses organised by the DC. The DC would have to accept that it could no longer rule without the contribution of the popular masses organised by the PCI.

The 1976 elections produced two victors: DC and PCI and hence a stalemate, a 'double siege'. Aldo Moro's conception of the role of the DC in this period was that its historical task was to create the conditions for the legitimisation of the PCI. That meant a rigorous control over public expenditure . . . would bust open its own system of clientele and patronage.

entailed a gradual absorption of the PCI in the system of power of the DC. It could eventually become the junior partner in the Welfare state of 'DC style'. Between 1976 and 1979 the DC kept all key positions, and avoided conflicts by letting the PCI become the principal defender of the Italian political system against the renewed attacks of terrorism. Unable to demarcate itself from the DC the PCI faced in 1979 its only serious electoral defeat.

The terrorists themselves were trying to become fully-fledged political subjects. The kidnapping of Aldo Moro had the objective of forcing the state itself to negotiate and hence to recognise them. The PCI succeeded in blocking any attempt on the part of the DC to try out their undoubted

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**Election results of National Parties 1946-83**

(1946: Constituent Assembly; 1948-83: Chamber of Deputies)

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<td>PCI</td>
<td>18.96(104)</td>
<td>31.03(183)</td>
<td>22.64(143)</td>
<td>22.73(140)</td>
<td>25.31(166)</td>
<td>26.96(177)</td>
<td>27.21(179)</td>
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<td>PSI</td>
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<td>12.73(75)</td>
<td>12.26(84)</td>
<td>13.87(87)</td>
<td>14.51(92)</td>
<td>9.63(61)</td>
<td>9.7(57)</td>
<td>9.8(62)</td>
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<td>PSDI</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>7.09(33)</td>
<td>4.52(19)</td>
<td>4.56(22)</td>
<td>6.11(33)</td>
<td>3.1(14)</td>
<td>5.15(29)</td>
<td>3.4(15)</td>
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<td>PRI</td>
<td>4.37(23)</td>
<td>2.49(9)</td>
<td>1.62(5)</td>
<td>1.38(6)</td>
<td>1.37(6)</td>
<td>1.97(9)</td>
<td>2.86(15)</td>
<td>3.1(14)</td>
<td>3.0(16)</td>
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<td>DC</td>
<td>35.18(207)</td>
<td>48.48(304)</td>
<td>40.08(262)</td>
<td>42.35(273)</td>
<td>38.27(260)</td>
<td>39.09(265)</td>
<td>38.74(266)</td>
<td>38.8(263)</td>
<td>38.3(262)</td>
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<td>3.38(19)</td>
<td>3.02(12)</td>
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<td>6.99(39)</td>
<td>5.83(31)</td>
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<td>4.87(25)</td>
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<td>5.3(30)</td>
<td>2.01(6)</td>
<td>5.85(29)</td>
<td>4.77(24)</td>
<td>5.11(27)</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>1.5(6)</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>4.46(23)</td>
<td>1.95(0)</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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<td>2.68</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
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**Notes:** PCI - Communists; PSI - Socialists; DC - Christian Democrats; PSDI - Social-Democrats; PRI - Republicans; PLI - Liberals; MSI - neo-fascists; PR - Radicals.

In 1948 the PCI and the PSI fought the elections jointly and so did the PSI and the PSDI in 1968. The PSIUP was a split off from the PSI, it merged with the PCI in 1972.
mediating skills in this novel terrain, in spite of the PSI's pressure to come to terms with the Red Brigades. The political defeat of the terrorists was signalled by their assassination of Aldo Moro. Since then they have suffered repeated losses and those who have not been arrested appear to have become nothing more than the hired killers of the Mafia.

The Socialist strategy
The murder of Moro also signalled the end of the DC's attempt to use the historic compromise as a device for reproducing its own conditions of rule. The Christian Democrats had, increasingly, to rely on their only remaining possible ally: the Italian Socialist Party. The new socialist leader, Bettino Craxi, having quickly demolished the old socialist establishment, proceeded to a large scale restructuring of the basis of consensus of Italian socialism. The PSI would seek to become the party of modernisation and efficiency, it would address itself specifically to Italian entrepreneurs and to the new middle classes.

The PSI faced a battle on two fronts: against the PCI who had until then appeared to be the only real alternative to the DC, and against the DC who had, until then, been the main depository of middle class representation. The PSI diagnosed the Italian problem as being that of a country out of phase with the political system of the rest of Europe: it is 'plagued' by two traditional cultures: old fashioned communism and traditional Catholicism. What Italy needed was to become like everyone else: to possess a 'proper' conservative party instead of that peculiar animal called the DC and a 'proper' socialist party instead of that European oddity called the PCI. Craxi's ambition was to become the Italian Mitterrand. Understandably Berlinguer was reluctant to play the part of Marchais.

Furthermore the PSI also needed international legitimacy. This could be achieved by obtaining a special status in Washington. The Americans had been perturbed at Moro's policies (Moro's widow is convinced that the US played a role in his assassination) and were in doubt as to the DC's reliability. Craxi offered himself as the Americans' reliable ally in Italy. His minister of defence, Lelio Lagorio, developed a great enthusiasm for Cruise missiles and embraced the new cold war with all the zeal of the recent convert.

Craxi thus chose to fight the DC on the Christian Democrats' own terrain of anti-communism and subservience to the US while offering an image of dynamism and efficiency. The PSI thought it had understood the mood of the late 70s and early 80s. In both Western Europe and North America important segments of the electorate were demanding something new and success came either to new parties (regional parties, 'greens', the Alliance, anti-tax parties, Papandreou, etc) or to old parties with a new image: the re-born Reaganites, Thatcher, the Spanish and French socialists, etc.

PSI and PCI
While in government the PSI tried to increase its share of the clientele and patronage systems in an attempt to weaken the DC. Leading members of the PSI were frequently in the news for various scandals ranging from involvement in the secret freemason organisation P2 and the Mafia to misappropriation of funds in Turin. The PSI could hardly appear as 'Mr Clean'. Nevertheless it sought to present itself to the electorate as the force of the future. If the voters wanted an alternative to the DC they should vote for the PSI. The PSI would ensure the governability of the country by continuing the coalition with the DC and use its greater strength by forcing more and more concessions, ie, more and more power positions, out of the DC. As for the Communists they would be condemned to opposition until various processes had matured. What could these be? If Italy was to align itself to what the socialists call the 'European model' something must happen to the PCI:

1. It must become a fully fledged 'social-democratic' party which means that it must stop pretending that there is a realistic way out of capitalism and come to terms with 'modernity'. Then and only then a strengthened PSI would be able to form with the PCI an alternative government of which the PSI itself would be the inspiring force able to offer to the international community (= the USA) the appropriate guarantees.

*Or*

2. The PCI will lose to the PSI the bulk of its 'modern' and 'forward looking' electorate (ie, its middle class vote) and would remain in a subordinate position (French style) with the unreconstructed rump of its loyal working class and artisan vote, and would have, to accept whatever crumbs of political power would be offered.

Craxi was looking forward to a decisive increase in votes which would permit him to lay claim to the prime ministership. It turned out that the outcome of the election was disappointing. The collapse of the DC to its lowest ever level did not result in a great socialist success. In fact even though the socialists increased their share of the vote, they polled less than in the 1980 local elections. If Craxi becomes Prime Minister it would be because of the DC's defeat not because of a PSI victory.

The DC's aborted rebirth
How did the DC face up to the PSI challenge? Its new leader Ciriaco De Mita had been able to unite the DC more than ever before. This party, traditionally in constant factional dispute, saw in its new, relatively young leader a chance to
overcome its deep crisis. De Mita fought hard to improve his party's image and fought Craxi's attack on the same terrain of dynamism and modernity. Borrowing a few concepts from the American and British neo-conservatives he emphasised the need to give way to native entrepreneurial talents, give more scope to the market, encourage self-help, promote the institutions of civil society: the family, firms, cooperatives, etc. He promised a greater honesty in public life and opened the DC to other forces. But he stopped short of a clear swing towards Thatcherism: cuts in public spending would hit its own popular base.

Like Craxi he attempted to depict the PCI as a force harking back to the paleolithic age. De Mita's impressive pre-electoral performance had won him much praise from opinion leaders such as the left-wing daily *La Republica* as well as — in this country — the *Guardian* and *The limes* but not what matters most: the electorate.

The results of the elections may be difficult to interpret, but one thing is certain: the DC has suffered an astounding defeat. Given the stability of the Italian electorate the drop in votes represents an electoral earthquake. The DC lost everywhere: in the North (—5.6%), in the Centre (—5%), in the South (—5.4%) and in the Islands (—6%). It lost some of its votes to the neo-fascists whose constant denunciation of scandals and corruption (and consequent calls for someone who will 'clean-up' Italy — no prizes for guessing how) attracted a protest vote. It lost votes to the Republicans who did better than anyone else and who, clearly, were able to offer the electorate the kind of image Craxi and De Mita had tried to construct for themselves: dynamism and modernity unsullied by corruption. Some votes went to the Liberal Party, the traditional home for middle class votes disaffected with the DC.

And the PCI?
The PCI was left more or less untouched by the electoral earthquake. It lost very little and because of the DC losses it could even claim a moral victory. It got as near to being the first Italian party as it ever got in forty years. It is now the leading party in nearly all main Italian cities. With eleven million votes it remains one of the strongest left-wing parties in Western Europe. Yet in spite of this it is as far from government as it was before the elections. The policy of 'democratic alternative' it launched after the failure of the historic compromise has not found any takers among the other parties. Nevertheless the PCI remains the only authentic alternative to the system of power of the DC.

Whilst the DC and the PSI were discovering modernity and dynamism, the PCI was coming to grips with some of the changes it had begun in the past ten years. At its sixteenth congress, last March, it consummated its final break with the USSR, revised the principles of democratic centralism and adopted the strategy of the 'democratic alternative'. The pre-congress debates showed that the only opposition to 'the break', that led by Armando Cossutta, had an estimated support of 10% (1% at the congress), less than anyone imagined. With its condemnation of the Polish military take-over and of the Soviet role in it, the PCI had arrived at the virtual end of an itinerary which began with the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and which was punctuated by the Prague Spring, the development of Eurocommunism and Afghanistan.

The debates over Poland were also characterised by much greater openness than in the past. Leaders attacked each other by name, a pleasant novelty in the PCI. Party members were less afraid to show their differences in the open. A motion by Pietro Ingrao, rejected before...
the Congress by the executive committee, demanded that divisions within the leadership should be made public. It was passed by various local federations until it was incorporated in the final document at the main Congress. The party's continuing effort to open up to the rest of society can be illustrated by the fact that it included — as in the past — a large number of non-party members in its electoral list and sent quite a few to Parliament: the leadership group of the PdUP (Party of Proletarian Unity) including Lucio Magri and Luciana Castellina who had been expelled from the PCI in 1970 for having formed the Manifesto faction; well-known feminists such as Carla Ravaiolli (already elected in 1979) and Laura Balbo; a socialist TV news producer, Andrea Barbate, fired from the Rai because he was not prepared to be Craxi's mouthpiece; a libertarian lawyer and writer like Stefano Rodota, the Keynesian economist Luigi Spaventa and many others.

As in 1979 the PCI sent to Parliament three times more women than all other parties put together: in all fifty women have entered the 630-strong Chamber of Deputies (PCI: 38 women, DC:6, PSI:1, PR:3, MSI:2). The PCI has also declared that the women elected in the PCI list, whether party members or not, could form, if they wished, a parliamentary caucus of women and lay down policies on all questions concerning the conditions of women. These policies would be considered as binding by all male communist MPs.

The democratic alternative
The new policy of 'democratic alternative' — like that of the historic compromise — has given rise to various interpretations. Just as the historic compromise was seen as reducible to an alliance at the political-parliamentary level between the DC and PCI, the democratic alternative has been seen by some as a modern edition of popular frontism: PCI + PSI + the smaller parties of the Centre and Left. Since the last elections this coalition has actually got a majority in Parliament, although its chances of coming about and then holding together are nil. The obstacles to this policy are numerous. In the first place no other party has shown any sign of accepting it. Secondly, without a common programme there would be a serious risk that the widespread popular sympathy such a coalition would at first generate would quickly disappear as the parties exhausted themselves in lengthy negotiations. Thirdly, it would put the PCI at the mercy of the traditional visions of political alliances. Simply to expand the workers and peasants alliance by including women, greens etc. bypasses the key question: to coordinate the activities of old and new social forces and political subjects on the basis of their position in society, their actual or potential contribution to it, their knowledge and expertise, their interconnections.

To build up this strategy requires a considerable revision of a large chunk of one's political tradition. It also requires great political courage to admit that the way forward is not achieved by returning to the purity of the past.

Time is running out
Clearly the PCI is back on the 'long haul' strategy and this is its chief weakness. Time is running out. Long haul strategies do not allow you to face the immediate future. Italy's financial crisis has reached monstrous proportions: the 1982 budget deficit was 12% of GNP (4.1% for Germany, 3.7% for the USA, 3.3% for Japan and 2.9% for France). Italian inflation is around 16%, three times the OECD average. In many areas of the South the mafia has become uncontrollable. The recent elections have revealed the utter crisis of Christian Democracy and will make the task of forming a government even more difficult. This article is being written a few days after the elections, it is quite possible that when it will be read there will not yet be a government in Italy.

The elections have been fought in Italy as they traditionally are: not so much around issues which a government would deal with but on a party's image and the social groups this party would defend. This is why the Italian Left and the PCI in particular must prepare a programme of government. This programme cannot be concocted by a few experts who will then leave the politicians with the task of selling it to the electorate. A government programme can only emerge if a party is able to tap the resources of social forces and social groups dispersed throughout society. The very construction of a programme must reflect the newly emerging alliances, the new demands. It must be able to be connected to other forces and other parties in other countries not on the basis of a common ideology or of a common history but of shared problems and interdependence.

That is an alternative to the old way of conducting political affairs. That is a Third Way'. But if the Italian Communists travel on it on their own they will not get anywhere and neither will we.