

Still the Good Europeans? The Italian general election of May 2001

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*Italy's national elections of May 2001 saw a convincing win for **Forza Italia** on the Centre–Right led by media proprietor and businessman Silvio Berlusconi, a political leader more sceptical of Europe than is usual in Italy. For some, the election marks the true beginning of Italy's Second Republic. For others **Forza Italia**'s success has given rise to questions of how much Italian politics has been normalised, and how much the style and practices of the Cold War era politics of the 'First Republic' have survived.*

Normalisation, Italian-style?

If we had to pick the most common theme in analyses of Italian politics at the end of the twentieth century, we would certainly choose their portrayal of an electorate that, disillusioned by repeated promises of political and institutional miracles, was in weary search of a return to normality (Diamanti and Lazar 1997). After the corruption scandals, the collapse of the dominant parties of the Christian Democrat regime between 1945 and 1994, the trials of senior politicians for mafia membership, the threat of secession in the country's economic heartlands and the fear of failure to qualify for immediate entry to the Euro-area, the brightest political utopia that most Italians are alleged to have yearned for has been normalisation of political life.¹ 'I want Italy to be a normal country', the future Prime Minister Romano Prodi told an English journalist in 1995 (Richards 1995, xxiii), an aspiration echoed by his successor Massimo D'Alema (1995) in his decision to give his own political credo the title *Un paese normale* (A normal country).

Like all roads, however, the road to normalisation leads in opposite directions — in this case, forwards towards what we might call 'Eurolandia' or backwards towards

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¹ For brief descriptions of the corruption scandals, see the entries 'Mani pulite' and 'Tangentopoli', in Moliterno (2000).

'democracy Italian style' (La Palombara 1987). On one hand, it traces the route towards a political system and practices that do not look too out of place among fellow-members of the European Union. It hopes for the definitive elimination of the patronage politics of the 'First Republic' of 1945 to 1994 and for the construction of an efficient political system based on stable governments led by political parties observant of the law, accountable to citizens and intent on implementing the policies promised to the electorate. In striking testament to those aspirations, Italians have consistently been the most enthusiastic supporters of ever-closer union in Europe. However, that same normalising road also leads backwards, *du côté de chez Andreotti et al*, the way of nostalgia for that very same *ancien régime* of unstable governments, corrupt parties, docile electors and the widespread preference for patronage over principle. The enthusiasts of normalisation in this second direction pursue restoration after the convulsions of the 1990s — rather as in the 1980s the major parties had managed to retrieve something resembling the *status quo ante* the rebelliousness and violence of the 1970s. Examining the features and aftermath of the Italian general election of May 2001 therefore provides a good opportunity to assess in which of these normalising directions the Italian political system appears to be moving. Towards the Promised Land, or Back to the Future?

The claim that those elections represented a particularly significant moment elections are . . . crucial', claimed one party leader, 'not only because they will determine who governs the country but because they will choose the model of the Italy we desire, the model of civility, of democracy . . .'² For the leader of the Centre-Right, the media magnate and wealthy businessman Silvio Berlusconi, the elections represented the chance for Italians finally to dispose of the legacy of the First Republic which was still blocking the transformation of their country into a fully free society. May 2001 therefore represented another potentially definitive moment in the campaign begun in 1994 and described by Berlusconi himself thus: 'If I had not been there to bar the road to the Italian Left, which still had clear communist connotations, our country would have endured for who knows how long an institutional situation characterised by a serious deficit in both liberty and democracy and would have been excluded from Europe and any international collaboration'.³ For his opponents, however, a victory of the Centre-Right would undermine the very foundations of Italian democracy. It would place in power a man who appeared only too ready to use all the advantages of public power to protect his private commercial interests and, where necessary, to bring about institutional changes to prevent those interests from judicial scrutiny. They recalled Berlusconi's record as Prime Minister in 1994 in sparing no effort to intimidate the Milan prosecutors who had incriminated him for accounting and tax offences, and his unrelenting attacks on the magistrature ever since. These portrayals of the high stakes involved in the elections thus suggested an unusually dramatic confrontation,

² Pierluigi Castagnetti, announcing the formation of the Daisy Alliance (four parties of largely Christian Democrat origin or inspiration), in a speech printed by *Il Popolo* 24 March 2001.

³ Interview published in *Ideazione*, November 2000 (also on Forza Italia website: <http://www.forza-italia.it/>)

more reminiscent of Cold War contests between good and evil than of a normal competition between parties which accepted, and were acknowledged to accept, the rules of a standard West European democracy.

Yet there are two puzzles in this presentation of the election in such dramatic terms. First, since for at least a year before it actually took place a large victory by the Centre-Right was regarded as inevitable by almost everyone, the level of the rhetoric seems somewhat inflated, more appropriate to a knife-edge event rather than a foregone conclusion. After all, there had already been alternation between the opposing sides of politics in 1994 and 1996, and the former Communists had been the leading figures in the Centre-Left government since 1996 without the end of Italian civilisation as we know it. The real puzzle, however, is just why that assumption of the Centre-Right's certain victory was so widely shared, given, on one hand, the unusually solid domestic and international achievements of the Centre-Left during its five years in government and, on the other, identification of the Centre-Right itself with a media magnate mired in scandals and conflicts of interest. Across the European political landscape, too, the most recent winning political formula had been the neo-Thatcherite soft-Leftism of Blair, Schroeder and Jospin; the appeal of full-blooded entrepreneurial values and free markets to the electorate seemed to have all but vanished. In this respect, too, Italy turned out to deviate from the experiences of its European partners.

Playing by which rules?

Until quite close to the election itself, it remained unclear under what rules the epic contest would be fought. The previous two elections had been decided according to the rules introduced between 1991 and 1994 which replaced the pure form of PR with a mixed majoritarian (75 per cent) and PR (25 per cent) system (Moss 2000). The outcomes of those new rules had pleased almost no one, especially no one who still hoped, with colossal lack of realism, that changing the electoral rules would in itself achieve the desired transformation of political and party behaviour. In fact, the political landscape since 1994 appeared to have shifted in exactly the opposite direction to that which the reformers had hoped to produce.

First, the number of small, even tiny, parties represented in Parliament had increased rather than diminished. Second, their rent-seeking power had been enhanced rather than reduced by the need for the two major parties, *Forza Italia* (FI) on the Centre-Right and the Left Democrats (DS) on the Centre-Left, to form electoral and governmental coalitions since neither could come anywhere near receiving a majority of votes in its own right.⁴ Third, the control over preselection

⁴ The changing nomenclature of Italy's major left-wing party in the 1990s can cause confusion. In 1991 the larger component of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) changed its name to the Democratic Left Party (PDS), the minority seceding to become the Refounded Communist Party (PRC). In 1998 the PDS became the Left Democrats (DS). We shall use whatever name was currently used by the party in the period we are discussing.

of candidates in coalitions had become even more centralised as the party leaders negotiated to ensure fair shares of safe seats: the chances of establishing a direct relationship between candidates and constituents — one of the key ambitions of the reforms in the early 1990s — were eroded rather than improved.⁵ Fourth, the different rules for the election of the two houses of Parliament, the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, had helped to produce different patterns of party representation in the two houses in both 1994 and 1996, threatening legislative paralysis. In 1994 the dominant Centre–Right coalition in the Chamber fell a few votes short of a majority in the Senate: in 1996 the Olive Tree coalition was much more dependent on its Refounded Communist Party allies in the Chamber than in the Senate where it had fallen just one vote short of an outright majority. Not surprisingly under these conditions, governments since 1994 had shown no greater cohesion or stability than the 50-odd governments which had followed one another into and out of power at roughly one year intervals under the *ancien regime*. The principal ambition of the architects of the 1993–94 electoral reforms — to move Italy towards a stable democracy in which at least solid coalitions of parties could legitimately arrive and remain in power by voter decision rather than the whims of party bosses — seemed as far from realisation as ever. The incentive to experiment with yet further changes to the electoral system is, therefore, not hard to understand.

Although many parties could be brought to agree that the 1994 rules should be improved, they were utterly divided on what would actually constitute an improvement. The most radical suggestion came from a parliamentary Bicameral Commission established in 1997 to produce a blueprint for the overhaul of the entire political system. It proposed the reduction of the majoritarian component from 75 per cent to 55 per cent so that a premium of 20 per cent of seats could be awarded to the winning coalition. In what was acknowledged as likely to continue to be a highly fragmented political system, this wheeze could at least enhance the government's position in parliament. The idea was enthusiastically endorsed by most of the minor parties which feared that the two largest parties, Forza Italia and the DS (Left Democrats) might instead agree simply to eliminate altogether the remaining PR component of 25 per cent of seats. In the Commission's proposal they saw a fantastic opportunity to hold the major parties permanently to ransom. Since it seemed inconceivable that either large party would ever approach a majority in its own right and since, on the experience of the 1996 elections, a very significant number of seats were marginal rather than safe, even the smallest political grouping could claim to be decisive somewhere on the electoral terrain and thus extract an exorbitant return for its support.⁶ They were destined to be disappointed, however: the other features of the Commission's wide-ranging reform proposals produced such intractable conflict among the parties that the package had to be withdrawn, taking the electoral suggestions down with it.

⁵ The weakened relations between candidates and electors undoubtedly contributed to the growing phenomenon, noted below, of sitting members changing parties in the course of the legislature.

⁶ In 1996 10 per cent of all majoritarian seats were won with a margin of 1 per cent of votes, and a further 19 per cent were decided by margins of no more than 8 per cent (D'Alimonte 1997, 150).

Undaunted, indeed provoked, by the major parties' inability to reach agreement on how to alter the 1993–94 rules, opponents of PR turned to the referendum option, an instrument which since the 1970s had become increasingly popular as a way of putting pressure on recalcitrant parliaments.⁷ A proposal to eliminate the PR component and make the electoral system purely majoritarian was therefore put to referendum in April 1999. The result of the vote was an overwhelming victory for the abolitionists of PR — except that not enough people actually cast their vote to render the referendum valid.⁸ Because the referendum had been declared invalid rather than a simple defeat, the opportunity to stage a re-run was available. So an identical referendum was held in May 2000, but this time to even worse effect from the standpoint of its supporters: only 32 per cent of the eligible voters bothered to go to the polls. A final effort to get rid of the PR element was made by the Centre–Left Government in October 2000 but was stymied by the Centre–Right which, in the light of the now-imminent elections, saw its best interest as currying favour with the small parties it might recruit as allies. Despite repeated promises of change, therefore, the elections of 2001 were fought according to the same rules as those of 1994 and 1996, requiring party electoral strategists to refamiliarise themselves with the lessons of those elections and the tactics by which victory had been achieved.⁹

Assembling alliances

The lessons of the 1990s

By now the experience of having twice contested elections under the new rules and then having tried to turn electoral alliances into stable governing majorities provided some valuable guidance for the leading parties on both sides. Five key lessons stood out. In the first place, elections could be won without a significant change in the patterns of voting. In 1996 an insignificant shift had taken place in the distribution of support for the major coalitions, yet the Centre–Left had unexpectedly managed to reverse its equally surprising defeat of two years earlier. Wooing undecided, wavering or hostile voters was going to be only part, and probably not the most important part, of a successful strategy.

⁷ Referenda to abrogate 53 laws and decrees were held between 1974 and 2000, 19 were successful, 16 were unsuccessful, and the results of a further 18 were declared void because too few voters participated for the quorum (50 per cent +1 of those eligible to vote) to be reached. Many more proposals to hold referenda had been submitted to the Constitutional Court but had been declared inadmissible.

⁸ The quorum was not reached by a tiny 0.3 per cent, leading to bitter recriminations against those parties who had advised their supporters not to participate and to fierce disputes about the accuracy of the count.

⁹ One modification, of particular interest to Italo-Australians, had been made in January 2001 when the Constitution was amended to allow Parliament to create a constituency for Italian citizens resident abroad. Early in 2002 the necessary details were embodied in legislation, so a new electoral constituency for Italians resident abroad will be introduced at the next national elections, due in 2006.

Second, since no party could get even close to a majority (in 1996 the leading party, the PDS as the DS then was, had achieved just 21 per cent of the vote), coalition-building would again be a crucial task on both sides. A cohesive array of allies would have to be assembled under a credible leader, and — equally important — some kind of electoral agreement would have to be reached if at all possible with the parties on the same side of politics which had chosen to remain outside the coalition. As far as the coalition proper was concerned, its members had to strike a delicate balance between emphasising the common elements in order to win seats together under the majoritarian component at the same time as achieving a clear differentiation from those same allies in order to improve their chances in the PR section.¹⁰ In 1994 Berlusconi had solved this problem, and produced a completely unexpected victory, by allying his party, *Forza Italia*, with the Northern League (NL) in the North and with the post-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) in the South, this geographical *coupure* neatly preventing the fundamental differences between his two allies from destroying the winning alliance (Gambetta and Warner 1996). As far as relations with neighbouring but non-coalition member parties went, the lessons of the past were equally unequivocal. In 1996, the unexpected victory of the Centre–Left had been achieved largely because its leaders came to an agreement with the true believers to its left, the Refounded Communist Party (PRC), to exchange votes and not field candidates in one another’s strongholds. The Centre–Right had not bothered to reach a similar agreement with its own brand of true believers on its right flank, the MSI–*Fiamma Tricolore*, and paid the price of losing sufficient seats to forfeit the entire election.

Third, both narrower and broader alliances had proven to be crucial in ensuring that the rewards of victory could in fact be enjoyed. For the two leading parties had each had the experience of watching their governing majorities evaporate with the withdrawal of a former ally’s support. In 1994 the NL had abandoned Berlusconi and, with breathtaking nonchalance, had shifted its support to its former electoral opponents to enable them to endorse a non-Berlusconi government. In 1998 it was the Centre–Left’s turn. The man who had led it successfully into the 1996 elections, Romano Prodi, was unhorsed, first by the defection of the PRC from the parliamentary majority, then by what was widely perceived as a palace coup led by his coalition allies in the DS. These same allies were then able to secure the prime minister’s job for their leader, Massimo D’Alema, by negotiating support from a minor party, the UDR, which had fought the previous election in the ranks of Centre–Right. In both cases the electorate could legitimately feel aggrieved that the choice of prime minister which had emerged from the ballot box had been subverted by party cabals with no reference whatever to popular opinion — just the sort of party power which the 1991–94 reforms had been designed to remove. Such practices — *trasformismo*, in the term used to describe them since Italy became a nation in 1861 — suggested that some features of Italian politics could easily survive any number of changes in electoral rules and political regimes.

¹⁰ The extenuating negotiations over each coalition partner’s share of the candidates to be supported in the majoritarian constituencies took place at the highest level.

Finally, a further gambit, within the letter of the current electoral law but utterly against its spirit, had been the use in 1996 of so-called *liste civetta* ('decoy lists') which enabled the larger parties to benefit in the PR section at the expense of smaller or unaligned parties. The election rules in fact require that coalition candidates for the majoritarian seats also declare their membership of specific parties in the PR competition, to which only parties that achieve at least 4 per cent of the overall vote are admitted. To protect small or independent parties, the party lists to which the majoritarian winners are linked are penalised by subtraction of those winners' votes when the PR calculation is made. Party strategists therefore noted that if their majoritarian candidates were linked to 'decoy lists' which stood no chance of reaching the 4 per cent threshold rather than the list of the party to which they really belonged, that penalty could be evaded and no votes would be lost. Although Italy's President appealed to the party leaders not to use this strategy, the appeal fell on ultimately deaf ears, providing one more reason for tense relations between small and large parties and for wishing to revise the electoral rules.

What the electoral and governing experiences of the previous decade in effect revealed was the skill the Italian political élite had displayed in subverting the central inspiration behind the reforms — the intention to transform the purest PR system known to Western democracy into a clear majoritarian system which would produce the kind of democracy where alternation in power between two groups of ideologically distinct parties could and would occur. What had in fact taken place was an expansion in the numbers of small parties and the consequent proportionalising even of the majoritarian component in the electoral system. The weight of even the smallest parties had been revealed to be crucial at some unpredictable stage and the need to ensure their fair treatment in candidatures, winnable seats and the spoils of victory remained as vital as ever. In the meantime, of course, the primary need was actually to win the elections by negotiating firm agreements with reliable allies under a credible leader. But in 2001, it was clear that the dominant parties in the two major coalitions were in rather different positions to ensure that happy condition of success.

The Centre–Right: building the House of Freedoms

By comparison with 1994 and 1996, the Centre–Right was in several respects in far better shape itself to meet the requirements for a solid coalition under authoritative leadership. In the long years in opposition Berlusconi had managed not only to acquire some direct experience of the detail of Italian politics, even though he continued to refer contemptuously to 'Roman politics' as unworthy of his attention, and had remained in unchallenged control even in the darkest days in the political wilderness. He had used the intervening period to transform *Forza Italia* from its original, highly unstable, combination of popular enthusiasms and direction by the former personnel of his company Fininvest — a 'flash' party — into a much more effective party machine along traditional lines. Between 1997 and 2001 party membership had risen from 140,000 to 350,000, the first congress had been held,

and the basic rules of internal party democracy had been established (Biorcio 2001, 631). Those efforts provided him with a more reliable power base from which to launch the creation of a winning electoral coalition that could be transformed into a stable governing alliance.

A key requirement, however, was to overcome the legacy of bitterness between *Forza Italia* and the Northern League which had destroyed Berlusconi's 1994 victory by defecting from the coalition after eight months in power. Berlusconi was greatly helped in this rapprochement by recent electoral results which showed great changes since 1994 when the Northern League had appeared to be enjoying an irresistible rise towards dominance in Northern Italy and *Forza Italia* had been little more than a recently invented personal vehicle for its leader and with a very uncertain future. In 1996, too, although the NL had not been part of the Centre-Right alliance, it had nonetheless achieved a respectable 10 per cent. However, by the European elections of 1999 its vote had been more than halved (4.8 per cent) and the polls were predicting a further decline in 2001, perhaps even below the threshold of 4 per cent required to compete for PR seats. In that event, representation of the League in Parliament would depend entirely on support from FI for its candidates in the majoritarian competition. It was therefore very much in the NL's own interest to reach some kind of agreement with its much larger ally, FI, for whom the polls indicated an increase in support of around 10 per cent. The other major partner in the Centre-Right, *Alleanza Nazionale*, found itself in a similar, although rather less exposed, position *vis-à-vis Forza Italia*. The support (16 per cent) it had enjoyed in the 1996 elections had fallen to 10 per cent in the European elections of 1999 and was not predicted to recover significantly in 2001. A solid electoral pact with Berlusconi was therefore very much in AN's interest. On a smaller scale, the same was true of the remaining minor parties in the House of Freedoms, the former Christian Democrat splinter groups CCD and CDU, which had won nearly 6 per cent of votes in 1996 but had declined to less than 5 per cent in 1999. As often in international politics, the clear hegemony of one partner in a coalition was the principal and effective condition for the stability of the coalition itself.

The increasingly dominant position of *Forza Italia* among its allies was also a firm guarantee of Berlusconi's own position as its uncontested leader. Berlusconi himself possessed a national and international profile, if not exactly an uncontroversial one, and had already served a term as Prime Minister in 1994. Moreover, since his principal allies consisted, on one hand, of a party considered by many to be only superficially post-fascist and as unacceptable in the EU as Haider had been in Austria and, on the other, of a party which had spent most of the 1990s demanding the dissolution of the Italian nation-state, he was at little risk from challenge by their leaders, the suspiciously suave Gianfranco Fini and the wildly irresponsible Umberto Bossi. Recent electoral trends, forecasts of the further decline in support for FI's allies and the absence of credible challengers for leadership of the coalition gave the Centre-Right a striking degree of coherence among groupings of Italian political parties.

This unusual strength of Berlusconi's position enabled him to prevent any of the severe criticisms he had to face from disrupting either the solidarity of the Centre–Right coalition or his own role as its leader. The major issue of conflict of interest — how an aspiring prime minister could retain control over television channels, publishing concerns and a string of very substantial retail and financial interests — was systematically evaded; at best, *ad hoc* and contradictory proposals were offered in the tone of someone who believed the issue was not of great concern to voters. He also brushed aside the accumulating series of offences — money-laundering, association with known mafiosi, tax evasion, false accounting, bribery of judges, politicians and fiscal police — on which he had been investigated or faced charges, declaring that he was simply the victim of a politicised segment of the magistrature.¹¹ Even when, in an unprecedented intervention towards the end of the election campaign, several reputable, mostly conservative, European newspapers and journals led by *The Economist* declared Berlusconi unfit to be Prime Minister, the reaction in Italy was largely indifference mixed with resentment that foreign interests evidently wished to sway the outcome of the national elections.¹² Throughout these diversions, which would surely have destroyed the political career of any other European party leader, the components of the Centre–Right alliance stood rock-solid behind their leader throughout the campaign as they had continued to do during the years of opposition. Indeed, the remarkable cohesion of the House of Freedom coalition since its eviction from power seven years earlier might seem to be a standing disproof of the only memorable pronouncement of that emblematic Christian Democrat, Giulio Andreotti, in response to observations about the pernicious consequences of long-term occupation of power: 'power only wears out those who don't have it'.¹³ In the event it was the Centre–Left opponents of Berlusconi, brought together under the label the Olive Tree (*l'Ulivo*), to whom even the enjoyment of the powers of government for the previous five years appeared to have brought little political advantage, indeed some very bitter fruits.

¹¹ In any case, the election to Parliament of people facing much more serious criminal charges than Berlusconi was far from unknown in Italy: for example, in 1976 a far right activist (Sacucci) accused of political murder had been elected, and in 1987 a political scientist from Padova University (Negri), facing terrorism charges, had been a successful candidate of the Radical Party. Part of the Italian political tradition has been to assume that criminal charges are often trumped up to serve political purposes and by no means exclude the fitness of their targets to represent electors.

¹² *The Economist* led the attack in its issue of 28 April 2001, supported by *Le Monde* and *El Pais*. *The Economist's* attack must have seemed especially bitter to Berlusconi given not only his support for the free markets and entrepreneurial values championed by the weekly but also the fact that his electoral manifesto had made English the first of the three vital elements in literacy for the 21st century (alongside information technology and business).

¹³ Andreotti, now a life senator, had enjoyed ministerial office more or less uninterruptedly from 1947 to 1992. His career was ended in 1994 by apparently credible accusations of murder and mafia membership: he was, however, acquitted of these charges when they came to court.

The Centre–Left: keeping the Olive Tree alive

At its birth in 1995, the Olive Tree coalition had presented itself as a synthesis of socialist, democratic–catholic and environmentalist cultures with a project to modernise, Europeanise and, in the noted formula, ‘normalise’ the country, under the leadership of Romano Prodi, a moderate catholic, professor of economics and respected manager untainted by close association with the Christian Democrat regime. The determination to create a modern Centre–Left coalition had been reinforced by the unexpected defeat of the combined left-wing forces in 1994 and the realisation that the collapse of their longstanding antagonist, the Christian Democratic Party, did not mean that the fruits were theirs for the picking: new parties like *Forza Italia* and the Northern League were quite capable of stealing them. Awareness of these new circumstances helped foster a considerable degree of cohesion within the coalition for the 1996 election, but as the legislature unfolded this was continually eroded by pressures from both within and without.

The coalition was undeniably variegated from the outset. Alongside the two main components, the PDS (Democratic Left Party) and the PPI (Popular Party) which were the principal descendants of the Italian Communist Party and the left-leaning faction of the Christian Democratic Party, respectively, were the Greens and a cluster of groups from the Christian Democratic and Socialist diaspora, some so small as to be dubbed ‘taxi parties’ (to indicate the seating required to accommodate their entire membership). While some divisions were attributable to genuine policy differences, it was the parties’ inability to adapt to political cohabitation that wrought most damage. The coalition’s interests were repeatedly subordinated to those of individual parties, each concerned with its own visibility and share of power. There was no central pole of attraction, since Prodi had been backed only by an ephemeral network of election committees and the PDS, the party with by far the biggest electorate and the only substantial organisational machine, was systematically denied acknowledgement of its dominant status by its partners. The pretext for this was the concern, to a great extent shared by the PDS itself, that a perceived hegemony of post-communists in the coalition would alienate the precious moderate vote.

The situation was exacerbated by the vulnerability of the Prodi government, whose parliamentary majority was the fruit of an electoral pact between the Olive Tree and the party to its left, the Refounded Communist Party (PRC). There were significant policy differences, however, and neither side intended that PRC should join the government. Predictably enough, bitter quarrels erupted on almost every major issue, peaking each year at budget time and leading to the PRC’s definitive withdrawal of support for the government in late 1998. From then on, the Centre–Left held on to power through a series of rearrangements of coalition boundaries and ministerial reshuffles worthy of the First Republic. The numbers deficit in parliament was made up by a band of defectors from the Centre–Right (UDR) and a segment of the PRC which had opposed the Prodi Government’s undoing and split to form the Party of Italian Communists (PDCI). Not only did the coalition become even more heterogeneous, fragmented and prey to every minor component’s whims,

but it also lost what credibility it had initially earned through the presence of a single, designated leader as Prime Minister. First, Prodi was levered out of the premiership by DS (previously PDS) leader Massimo D'Alema, a betrayal which prompted Prodi to create his own new party, the Democrats (*Democratici*), even though he himself almost immediately withdrew from direct involvement in Italian politics to assume the Presidency of the EU Commission in Brussels. After a year of hostility, during which even the name Olive Tree was dropped, D'Alema's Government was engineered into a 'crisis' to allow a reshuffle that would bring the Democrats back into the fold. Finally, when D'Alema resigned following a disastrous result for the Centre-Left forces in the regional elections of April 2000,¹⁴ a fourth government was cobbled together, this time with the effectively non-aligned former socialist Giuliano Amato at the helm.

The declining electoral fortunes of the Centre-Left, observable in local contests from 1998 onward, the European election of 1999 and the regionals of 2000, were of grave concern to the DS in particular, which was losing ground in the coalition just as *Forza Italia* was strengthening its position within the Centre-Right. Support for the Left was shrinking visibly even in its stronghold, the central 'red regions', where in 1999 the loss of the mayorship and control of Bologna City Council, once the showpiece of communist local government and dominated by the PCI/PDS/DS since 1945, had provoked obvious consternation.¹⁵

The inability of the major left-wing party to become the legitimate nucleus of the coalition was partly attributable to its own continuing search for a definitive identity, initiated in 1989 with the decision to abandon communism and by no means concluded when several very small groups joined with the PDS to create the DS in 1998. A key internal division had been born along with the Olive Tree and revolved around whether the party should continue to pursue a 'European social-democratic' vocation and the consolidation of the left flank of the coalition, (the option favoured by D'Alema and the majority), or work towards the co-founding of some kind of generic 'democratic party' built on the increasingly catch-all nature of the Olive Tree coalition and its parliamentary supporters. The DS's credentials to lead the coalition had also been weakened by D'Alema's failure to bring the work of the reformist Bicameral Commission to a successful conclusion and by his subsequent stint as an unpopular prime minister.

All the coalition's deficiencies — the proliferation of component parties, the deterioration of relations between them and the lack of a dominant one — were reflected in and magnified by its leadership problem. When Amato was sworn in less than a year before the general election, no one knew who the Centre-Left's

¹⁴ The Centre-Right won in 9 of 15 regions including the key northern ones.

¹⁵ Bologna, the 'Red City' par excellence, had actually been captured by an Independent who took good care to distinguish himself from *Forza Italia* and the Right; none the less, the end of the uninterrupted sequence of Communist and post-Communist mayors since 1945 was a devastating blow to the Left. For an explanation of the defeat, see Campus and Pasquino (2000).

candidate for prime minister would be, nor were any procedures in place to select one. The job eventually fell to Francesco Rutelli, then mayor of Rome and a member of the tiny group of Prodi's Democrats,¹⁶ after an unofficial contest with Amato lasting several months. The victory of the youthful, 'telegenic' Rutelli was owed essentially to opinion polls and reciprocal vetoes within the coalition: there was no open confrontation over ideas and policies (Pasquino 2001). The victor had neither representative authority nor experience in national government. As in 1996, the coalition went into battle with its leader chosen from a minor party and thus fatally exposed to the opposition's charges that he was in no sense a genuine leader with a real capacity to impose cohesion and direction on his more powerful coalition allies.

The 'Olive Tree — Together for Italy' alliance that Rutelli eventually led into the campaign was composed of eight groups, although two distinct aggregations were made for the proportional segment, in view of the requirement to reach the 4 per cent threshold. The four centre parties (Popular Party, Democrats, Italian Renewal and the Union of Democrats for Europe or UDEUR) joined forces as the Daisy (*Margherita*); and the Greens and Democratic Italian Socialists came together under the emblem of the Sunflower (*Girasole*). Apparently undaunted by previous experience, the coalition again sought a non-belligerence pact with PRC, which this time conceded over the lower house but insisted on fielding its own candidates in the Senate. To complicate the situation further, another three competitors for the anti-Berlusconi vote entered the fray, all led by well-known personalities (Antonio Di Pietro, the hero of the anti-corruption investigations; Emma Bonino, a former EU Commissioner; and the trade union leader Sergio D'Antoni), all of whom declined to make any kind of electoral pact with the Olive Tree coalition. In the light of the travails within the Centre-Left from 1996 onwards, it will be clear that the 2001 election was as much lost by the Olive Tree as won by the House of Freedoms.

Conducting the campaign

It was, as many commentators observed, the longest electoral campaign in Italian postwar history. For more than a year, following the severe defeat of the Centre-Left in the regional elections of April 2000, the Centre-Right had been decorating Italian cities with giant portraits of Berlusconi, announcing that every survey result predicted his overwhelming victory whenever the next elections were held, and proclaiming the miracles that his return to the prime ministership would perform for the country. Berlusconi himself had been formally demanding immediate national elections ever since Centre-Left Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema had resigned after the debacle of the regional elections and the resultant rumblings in his own supporters' ranks. But Italy's President, the former head of the central bank, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, had refused to accede to Berlusconi's demands by dissolving

¹⁶ Rutelli had entered parliament in the 1980s with the Radical Party and been elected mayor of Rome as an exponent of the Greens before gravitating to the Democrats in 1998 along with a number of other mayors from different parties.

parliament a year early and had appointed the clearly stop-gap Giuliano Amato as prime minister. The fragility of Amato's hold on office, since he was identified with none of the parties in the governing majority, served simply to encourage both sides to begin target practice in preparation for the coming battle.

In the elections of the 1990s the rules governing conduct of the electoral campaign itself (especially access to media and expenditure by parties and candidates) had themselves been matters of significant controversy because of the media power and financial resources at Berlusconi's disposal.¹⁷ In 2001 such issues were much less prominent, for several reasons. In the first place, the majority of Italians had shown in the referenda of 1995 that Berlusconi's media dominance was of little real moment: they had refused, by a large margin, to support a proposal to limit the number of television stations that any individual might own. Second, despite Berlusconi's media power, the Centre-Left had none the less emerged victorious in 1996, making it impossible to renew the claim, made with considerable plausibility in 1994 and in the run-up to the 1996 elections, that monopoly control over the private media was in itself a decisive factor in any electoral contest. Third, the strict rules enacted in 1993 to ensure equal access to media and fair treatment of parties had been regarded as largely effective in 1996 and had been further strengthened — to the point of maniacal pedantry, according to some commentators — in 2000 (law n. 28, 22 February). Equality of access by major parties and candidates had already been reinforced in 1997 by the establishment of a public agency to monitor practice.¹⁸ Fourth, continuing to make Berlusconi's control over the media a primary target only focused attention on the issue of the man himself, his entrepreneurial success and the resources he enjoyed as leader — just the terrain on which in any direct comparison between the leaders of the two coalitions the Centre-Left was likely to come off worse.

In terms of policy content, little separated the contending coalitions. Already in 1996 a significant convergence on their themes and policies had been noted (Campus 2001), and it was probably even more marked in 2001 as both sides made a particular bid for the central segment of the electorate. Both coalitions offered their diagnoses and promises on what they and electors agreed were the four most important issues for Italy: unemployment, immigration, crime and taxes. The difficulty of distinguishing sharply between the kinds of policies, as opposed to the details of the promises, offered by the two sides was further increased by the failure to stage any direct debates between the leaders. Although Berlusconi could still harp on the threat that 'communists' dominating the Centre-Left continued to pose for Italian democracy and their sympathies for terrorism, the Cold War rhetoric of elections as a battle between good and evil had by now largely disappeared. What

¹⁷ Although Berlusconi is best known as a media magnate, his economic interests include powerful companies in the retail, insurance and advertising industries inside and outside Italy. The conflicts of interest he was destined to face as prime minister therefore go far beyond the media industries and are of Europe-wide concern because of his holdings in France and Spain.

¹⁸ In 2001 the screen time actually enjoyed by the two leaders, Berlusconi and Rutelli, turned out to be more or less equal (Sani 2001: 619).

replaced it was — unusually for a country whose politics had traditionally been so dominated by the power of parties as to be responsible for the creation of the neologism ‘partyocracy’ — a close and virtually exclusive focus on the characteristics of the two men contending for the prime ministership.

Both Berlusconi, a practised media performer, and Rutelli, guided by a public relations wizard who had masterminded campaigns for Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, made use of the same standard techniques for achieving high public visibility, with a few differences of style to preserve the Right/Left distinction. So if Berlusconi chose to take his campaign around Italy on a luxury cruiser, Rutelli would travel by the humbler mode of rail, dubiously more comfortable and reliable than the bus used by his predecessor Romano Prodi. And, because of their very different relationships with their coalition allies, Berlusconi’s performances were reminiscent of a general reviewing his loyal and well-disciplined troops, while Rutelli must too often have reminded his audiences of the desperate conductor in Fellini’s *Prova d’orchestra* attempting to make the anarchic musicians in his orchestra play in any kind of harmony.¹⁹ But, contrasts of style aside, the emphases and symbolic reference points of both contenders drew particular attention to the couplet Italy/Europe and the likely impact on this relation if one rather than the other came to power.

Berlusconi’s two innovations in electoral tactics illustrate this focus clearly. A month before the elections he sent to 12 million households a copy of his illustrated autobiography, *Una storia italiana*.²⁰ In this compilation, Berlusconi swathed himself in every commonplace trope available to an Italian son, husband, father, businessman and politician who wants recognition as a cynosure in all those fields. A still more striking initiative was his appearance on a television chat-show just a few days before the election to sign a solemn contract between himself and all Italians. In this ‘contract’, to which there was a prime-time audience in the role of witness but no co-signatory, Berlusconi indicated five policy goals to be met if he became Prime Minister; if at least four had not been achieved in his first full term in office, he promised that he would not stand at the next elections.²¹ It is impossible to know whether or not these gestures had any impact on the vote. But as symbols of Berlusconi’s determination to create the appearance of direct personal relations

¹⁹ The most direct confrontations pitted him against the incumbent Prime Minister Amato. In March 2001 Amato declared in exasperation to the *Financial Times* that the Centre-Left simply had no leader. But the coalition also fought over candidatures, symbols and the financial contributions of each party to the campaign.

²⁰ The book was published by Mondadori, one of Italy’s premier publishing houses, which Berlusconi owned. The operation cost 37 milliard lire — a sum which drew comment because it was so far in excess of what his opponent, or any other candidate, could afford.

²¹ The five goals were: tax reductions all round; an increase in the minimum pension; the establishment of neighbourhood policing and reduction in the crime rate; the halving of the current unemployment rate; and the launch of a massive public works program.

with voters, mixing the styles of cultural and commercial commitment, they were something of a public relations coup.²²

While Berlusconi emphasised his emblematic Italianness, his opponents put much more emphasis on the theme of Europe. Negatively, they prophesied the national ignominy and practical damage that the eventual appointment as prime minister of a man who had been under criminal investigation for nearly a decade for corrupt business dealings would do to Italy's international role and reputation.²³ Italy had been not only the EU member state under whose presidency the great leaps forward of the mid-1980s and early 1990s in European integration had taken place but it was also the country in which the highest levels of popular support for Europe have consistently been recorded. It was therefore the Centre-Left's claim that this traditional plank of Italian foreign policy would be seriously threatened by the victory of the Centre-Right.

Positively, however, an essentially European achievement was the central element in the Centre-Left's case for its own election: the good economic management that, to the rather embarrassed surprise of its EU neighbours, had enabled Italy to become one of the first group of member-states to meet the tough conditions for adoption of the Euro. The importance given to that achievement, and more generally to the initiatives that the succession of Centre-Left governments had steered through since 1996, was something of a novelty in the electoral rhetoric of an outgoing government. At least until 1992, postwar governing coalitions would at least have hesitated before doing anything as rash as reminding the electorate of its record in office — in part because Cold War elections had been fought on the higher plane of the contest between good and evil, in part because the achievement of major structural reforms had always been limited and bitterly controversial, in part because the real legislative success story lay in the myriad very narrowly focused laws (*leggine* = 'little laws') which, if bragged about in an election campaign, would alienate many more voters who saw that they had been excluded from benefits than it would reinforce the allegiance of the beneficiaries. In any case, the different parties in the succession of coalition governments since 1948 had often argued heatedly about the value of any given general measure, and they were much more likely to use the electoral campaign to disclaim, rather than claim, policy paternity. So in 2001 the sober emphasis by the Centre-Left on its record in government departed rather markedly from the traditional technique of trying to frighten voters into rejecting opponents rather than seducing them into support.

However, neither the charges of Berlusconi's unfitness to hold office nor the Centre-Left's insistence that it had demonstrated over five years much better government than Berlusconi had managed in 1994 did much to alter the standing of

²² He used the same tactic after he became Prime Minister, sending all Italian households a 2001 Christmas card along with a calculator for converting lire into euros.

²³ The most forceful statement of this view came in a powerful appeal to vote against the Centre-Right launched in March 2001 by the Turin political philosopher and sage Norberto Bobbio.

either coalition in the surveys of voting intentions. The Centre–Left started and finished as the clear underdogs. At no time between mid-1999 and March 2001 did it and the PRC together ever rise above 38 per cent nor did the Centre–Right fall below 51 per cent. On the eve of the elections the Centre–Left enjoyed the support of 37.5 per cent of voters, against the Centre–Right’s 54 per cent. Surveys of voter intentions have sometimes turned out to be quite inaccurate once the ballot boxes are opened — but in this case there were to be no surprises.

The results: winners and losers

As they have traditionally done in national elections, Italians turned out to vote in large numbers. The 81.2 per cent of eligible voters who cast their ballots (voting is not mandatory in Italy) represented only a slight decline on participation in 1996 (82.9 per cent) and 1994 (86.1 per cent), suggesting that Italian interest in politics had not diminished significantly during the latest legislature and that the downward trend in participation, observable since 1976 when 93 per cent went to the polls, might be slowing. Their enthusiasm was, however, undoubtedly dampened by having to face hours in traffic jams and queues at polling booths, caused by the Interior Ministry’s decision to cut the number of booths by one third. Many polling booths had to delay closing for several hours, the record going to Reggio Calabria where the last booth closed seven hours late. The resulting chaos did nothing to boost the outgoing government’s image or morale on this crucial day.

When they finally became available, the overall pattern of electoral results suggested that Italian voters might be ‘normalizing’ their behaviour in line with the common trend among European electorates. The centre of gravity had shifted towards the middle ground of the political spectrum, with *Forza Italia* dominant on one side and the Daisy formation almost matching the DS on the other. This was in striking contrast to 1996 when it had been parties at the extremes — AN and PRC — whose vote had improved markedly. The smaller parties on both sides were penalised and the non-aligned contestants failed to make any kind of serious mark: even ‘Mr Clean Hands’, the former magistrate Di Pietro — Italy’s most popular man only a few years earlier and one of Berlusconi’s fiercest critics and targets — attracted almost no support outside his small home region of Molise.

Apart from the discomfiture of his old antagonist, the outcome gave Berlusconi much to celebrate, as the undisputed leader of a government which set out in an incomparably more secure position than his own in 1994 or Prodi’s in 1996. Not only did the Centre–Right obtain an outright majority of seats in both houses, but his own party climbed to nearly 30 per cent of the proportional vote, in line with the most optimistic predictions, while both the Northern League and the CCD–CDU sank below the 4 per cent threshold for allocation of proportional seats and the *Alleanza Nazionale* lost ground as expected. All these parties were nonetheless quite well represented in Parliament, thanks to the distribution of majoritarian seats, and the NL’s decision to join the coalition had clearly paid off.

This did not stop Bossi from assuming a threatening stance immediately, lamenting that the League had paid a ‘monstrous price’ entirely to the benefit of the coalition, having been deserted by many of its faithful who did not trust Berlusconi’s promises. While he initially claimed the Government would be reliant on League support in the Senate, the numbers did not bear this out.

Table 1
Election Results for Chamber of Deputies, 1996 and 2001

1996				2001			
	% prop	% maj	seats		% prop	% maj ^a	seats
				Refounded Communist Party	5.0		11
Refounded Comm. Party (PRC)	8.6			Italian Communists (PDCI) ^b	1.7		
Greens	2.5			Sunflower ^c	2.2		
Democratic Left Party	21.1			Left Democrats ^d	16.6		
Popular Party/Prodi	6.8			Daisy ^e	14.5		
Italian Renewal	4.3						
Other	0.1						
Olive Tree + PRC	43.4	45.4	319 ^f	Olive Tree	35.0	43.7	250
Northern League	10.1	9.9	59	Northern League	3.9		
				New Socialist Party	0.9		
CDU–CCD ^g	5.8			White Flower ^g	3.2		
<i>Forza Italia</i>	20.6			<i>Forza Italia</i>	29.4		
National Alliance	15.7			National Alliance	12.0		
Freedom Alliance	42.1	40.3	246	House of Freedoms	49.4	45.4	368
				Di Pietro	3.9	4.1	0
Pannella	1.9	0.4	0	Bonino	2.3	1.3	0
				D’Antoni-Andreotti	2.4	3.6	0
Others	2.5	4.0	6	Others	0.4	1.9	1
			630				630

Notes: ^a Refounded Communist Party (PRC) did not contest any majority seats.

^b The Party of Italian Communists (PDCI) split from the Refounded Communist Party (PRC) when the latter withdrew parliamentary support for the Olive Tree government

^c Sunflower: Greens and Italian Democratic Socialists (SDI)

^d The Democratic Left Party (PDS) joined with several small formations in 1998 to become the Left Democrats (DS)

^e Daisy: Popular Party (PPI), Democrats, Italian Renewal (RI), Union of Democrats for Europe (UDEUR, previously UDR)

^f Includes 35 PRC seats

^g White Flower: Christian Democratic Centre (CCD), United Christian Democrats (CDU)

Abbreviations: maj = majoritarian segment, prop = proportional segment

Sources: *la Repubblica* 16 May 2001 and <<http://www.repubblica.it/speciale/elezioni2001>>

Just one cloud hung over Berlusconi's triumph: his party's massive use of the 'decoy lists' (*liste civetta*) had backfired. Partly because of its unexpectedly large victory in several regions, *Forza Italia* risked being deprived of fourteen seats from the PR competition because it was unable to fill them: the individuals who could qualify — its unelected majoritarian candidates — were not linked to the FI proportional ticket but to the decoy ticket created to protect it. The party leaders were unabashedly indignant, insisting that their voters' intentions be respected. One of the constitutional lawyers responsible for the electoral mechanisms, Augusto Barbera, observed '*Forza Italia* has been the victim of excessive success, cunning and lack of skill' (*la Repubblica*, 17 May 2001).

Table 2
Election Results for Senate,^a 1996 and 2001

1996			2001		
	% maj	seats		% maj	seats
			PRC	5.0	3
Olive Tree + PRC	44.2	167 ^b	Olive Tree	39.2	128
Northern League	10.4	27			
Freedom Alliance	37.3	116	House of Freedoms (inc. North'n League)	42.5	177
			Di Pietro	3.4	1
Pannella–Sgarbi	1.6	1	Bonino	2.0	0
			D'Antoni–Andreotti	3.2	2
Others	6.6	4	Others	5.2	4
		315			315

Notes: ^a There is no separate ballot paper for the proportional segment in the Senate. The proportional seats (25% of total) are distributed among the candidates not elected in the majority segment. Each group (usually a coalition) is allocated a number of proportional seats calculated on the basis of the number of votes received by its non-elected candidates as a proportion of the total for all groups. The threshold is applied for each region

^b Includes 10 seats to Refounded Communist Party (PRC)

Sources: *la Repubblica* 16 May 2001 and <http://www.repubblica.it/speciale/elezioni2001>

The Centre–Left leaders sought consolation by pointing to the narrowness of the defeat in terms of the popular vote: a mere 1.7 per cent margin of difference between the two coalitions in the majority segment for the House of Deputies. However, the gap was much wider in the proportional segment, with 35 per cent

going to the combined Olive Tree forces (40 per cent including PRC) and 49 per cent to the House of Freedoms. Clearly, despite the centripetal forces at work within the Centre–Left coalition, it was still able to enhance its overall support with respect to that of its component parts, as it had done in 1996, but not on a sufficient scale to win on this occasion. All parties joined in recriminations against PRC which stood accused of having split the anti-Berlusconi vote. To this, PRC leader Bertinotti replied, ‘you can’t add potatoes and carrots’; and it is probably true that any such agreement would have had its own cost in the loss of votes at both the moderate and extreme ends of the Olive Tree–PRC spectrum. In any case, the experience of the previous legislature suggests that any benefits to the Olive Tree might well have been only short-term.

Within the Centre–Left area, the sense of defeat was unevenly distributed. While there was dismay in the DS at its decline from 21.1 per cent to 16.6 per cent, the Daisy camp could not hide its satisfaction at reaching 14.5 per cent, a success partly attributable to its ownership of the prime ministerial candidate. The fact that the Daisy had evidently made considerable inroads in the DS heartland in central Italy did not help the parties coalesce in opposition any better than before the election. In the aftermath of defeat, the individual parties on the Centre–Left were largely preoccupied with their individual concerns. The Daisy’s components considered whether to turn their electoral pact into institutionalised links, the Greens faced calls for dissolution and rebirth and the DS geared up for a congress to try to tackle long-standing tensions brought to the fore by the defeat, alongside the widespread grass-roots demand for a complete revitalization of the party’s values, strategy and organization. Meanwhile, the alliance continued to behave as a loose aggregation of parties with differing agendas and no formal relations. Two days after the election, a summit meeting of all parties confirmed Rutelli and his deputy, Piero Fassino of the DS, in leadership roles, but once again in a wholly informal manner. Some high-level dissent surfaced over this procedure, particularly since the Rutelli–Fassino team had been the clear losers in the election.²⁴ Their re-investiture clearly depended more on inter-party and intra-party dynamics than on any expectations of their ability to perform in the new roles, which were ill-defined anyway. The DS leader Veltroni proposed the immediate creation of a shadow cabinet — unknown in Italy except for a brief experiment by the PCI in 1988–89 as part of its transition to post-communism — but his allies objected that too much time would be required for any such move. The same idea was to resurface several months later, coming from Rutelli this time, amidst further coalition in-fighting and charges that the Olive Tree was dead.

The size of the Centre–Right’s victory, by comparison with the much closer outcomes of 1994 and 1996, will undoubtedly help to reduce one of the major sources of governmental instability and party friction. Two significant, clearly

²⁴ The leader of one DS faction said ‘It’s a strange procedure, to establish that everything will stay the same, the very day after the vote . . . In a democracy we can’t not discuss these things’ (Cesare Salvi, reported in *la Repubblica*, 16 May 2001).

associated, features of the parliaments of the 1990s were the extent of turnover at elections among MPs and the fragile affiliation of many MPs to the parties under whose banners they had been elected.

In the last elections of the First Republic, in 1983 and 1987, the proportion of newly-elected MPs among the total was 32 per cent and 28 per cent respectively. But in 1992, 1994 and 1996 the renewal rate rose to 43 per cent, 71 per cent and 51 per cent; and this level was maintained in 2001 with 50 per cent of MPs who had not served in the outgoing Parliament.²⁵ Such a consistently high renewal rate, alongside the failure of nearly 20 per cent of sitting MPs who stood unsuccessfully for re-election in 2001, signals the difficulty that most party leaders had in exercising control over their inexperienced and volatile parliamentary troops — a difficulty which is evidenced by the very large number of MPs who changed party allegiances in the outgoing Parliament.

In the first two years of the Parliament elected in 1996, for example, no fewer than 90 MPs (14 per cent of the total) and 54 senators (17 per cent of all senators) had moved to affiliate with a party different to that in whose ranks they had been elected (Zannini 1999, 294–8). Given the narrow majority enjoyed by the governing coalitions of 1994 and 1996, the rent-seeking ambitions of the minor parties and individual politicians was a significant feature of national politics, damaging to both sides. However, the size of the Centre–Right’s victory has sharply reduced this blackmail capacity, and less volatile parliaments, and less government exposure to the merely sectoral demands of individual parliamentarians, can be expected.²⁶

Conclusion: the passage of time and the fruits of victory

February 2002 marked the tenth anniversary of the arrest which launched the public phase of the ‘Clean Hands’ judicial investigations in Milan, provoked the rapid unravelling of the political parties of the Christian Democrat regime and generated the political upheaval and promise of the mid-1990s. But, as one of the magistrates pointed out, reviewing the results of those investigations a decade later tells a much less edifying story of change and renewal.²⁷ Roughly two-thirds of the 3200 prosecutions will have failed because of the statute of limitations, a level of immunity which is likely to reduce public confidence in the judicial system still further and encourage the corrupt and corruptible to return to business as usual. Furthermore, the 2001 elections have seen the reduction to virtual insignificance of the political movement, the Northern League, which had been the incarnation of

²⁵ For the 1983 to 1995 figures, see Verzichelli 1995, 403, Table 1. The figures for 1996 and 2001 are taken from data on the Chamber of Deputies website. Not all ‘new’ MPs are genuinely new: some were members of penultimate or earlier parliaments.

²⁶ In their electoral pact the four parties of the House of Freedoms attempted to preempt future difficulties by declaring that they would not in future accept the adhesion of any political grouping that had fought the election under its opponents’ banner and would only accept the transfer of affiliation by individual MPs in those parties if it served to provide the coalition with a stable majority.

²⁷ Gherardo Colombo, interviewed in *Corriere della sera*, 6 February 2002.

much of the original desire for political change. In the elections of 1992 and 1994 the distribution of electoral support for the League throughout Northern Italy strongly suggested that it was destined to inherit the dominant representative role hitherto played by the Christian Democrat party. By 2001, however, that hope (or fear) has simply vanished: the so-called 'Northern Question' is no longer posed and the accompanying threat of the dissolution of the Italian nation-state withdrawn.

The real legatee of the DC has turned out to be *Forza Italia*, which is now approaching the level of popular support enjoyed by its predecessor in its years of political dominance. If we add to this picture the continuing disarray in leadership, organisation and policy among the Centre-Left, then we get a forceful reminder of the early years of the establishment of the First Republic in the late 1940s, clothed in the language of the stadium and business politics rather than the pulpit and social solidarity.

After a year in office, to what extent has the record of the Centre-Right shown clear signs of drift away from the models of social democracy held out by the European Union and back towards the Italy that the Clean Hands investigations seemed in the mid-1990s to have discredited? By contrast with his first spell as prime minister in 1994, Berlusconi has mostly sought to avoid dramatic party and institutional confrontations in the field of domestic politics. Relations with the judiciary remain tense. In January 2002, a large number of magistrates took advantage of the formal inauguration of the academic year to display their strong opposition to what they saw as the government's plans to subordinate the judiciary to the executive. In his own longstanding defence against charges of corruption, false accounting and tax avoidance, Berlusconi has been helped by the passage of legislation sponsored by his government which reclassifies key charges and raises issues of evidence and procedure.²⁸

On the controversial issue of the Prime Minister's conflicts of interest, a proposal for their handling presented by Berlusconi himself is currently under final discussion in Parliament.²⁹ Rejecting the suggestion that private interests should be disposed of (infringement of an individual's constitutional rights) or their management placed in the hands of a commissioner (unfair penalty on the enterprise) or a blind trust should be set up (ineffective), the bill proposes the creation of a public body with powers to verify that the public interest is protected in cases of conflicts of interest involving ministers, under-secretaries, the presidents of regional and provincial administrations and the mayors of the largest cities. The solution draws heavily on the arrangements for the anti-trust agency established in 1990 and is probably as much as can be realistically achieved at present.

²⁸ For details of the outstanding charges and the Prime Minister's position, see *The Economist*, 20 July 2002, 43-4.

²⁹ Ddl n.1707, presented on 4 October 2001, approved by the Chamber on 28 February 2002, and approved by the Senate on 4 July 2002. The original text is available at the following URL: <http://www.governo.it/sez_dossier_nuovi/conflitto_interessi/index.html>

Most of the major political clashes have indeed come exactly where they might have been predicted — in relation to European affairs. Berlusconi has tried to block the establishment of a Europe-wide arrest warrant, made judicial interrogations abroad harder and put Italy at odds with its EU partners in several fields.³⁰ Indeed, the signals of coolness on European issues by the Centre–Right government have been sufficiently strong to provoke the resignation of the Europhile Foreign Minister and former head of the WTO Renato Ruggiero in January 2002. Berlusconi himself then took over the responsibility for foreign affairs, apparently to the less than complete enthusiasm of Italy's President, for a period of at least 6 months. In one of his first statements in his new role, Berlusconi announced that Italy would be dropping what he called its 'dogmatic pro-EU approach', signalling that his preferred stance was not to serve as an advocate for ever greater levels of integration — Italy's traditional role — but to be a neutral broker between the increasingly evident competing views on the EU's future.³¹ However, the Minister for Institutional Reform and Devolution and leader of the Northern League, Bossi, has launched several scathing attacks on the EU for its low levels of democracy and lack of will to tackle hard immigration issues, leaving it open to speculation how far his Prime Minister, in spite of his dismissal of such broadsides as typically colourful outbursts, might privately share some of those sentiments. Whether future political historians will indeed look back on the elections of 2001 as the real inauguration of Italy's Second Republic since 1945 and of the retreat from the principles of that treaty signed in Rome in 1956 to establish the European project remains to be seen.

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³⁰ Berlusconi's resistance to efforts to make Europe-wide cooperation in criminal investigations easier was, rightly or wrongly, widely interpreted as an attempt to inhibit inconvenient enquiries into his own companies' affairs by judges elsewhere in Europe who would be less vulnerable to political pressure.

³¹ See his interview in the *Financial Times*, 18 January 2002.

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