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Your reference

Our reference

Date 4 June 1981

*Dear Roy,*

PRI CONGRESS

1. The Republican Party held their Congress in Rome from 22-25 May. It was unremarkable, and overshadowed by the Government crisis which looked probable from Sarti's resignation on 23 May onwards; nevertheless you may welcome a short report.
2. More than 2000 delegates attended this Congress, the party's first since the death of its 'father figure', Ugo La Malfa. There were only a few foreign observers, but they included Richard Holme of the British Liberal Party.
3. The main question was whether the Party Secretary, Spadolini, would be able to maintain the unity of the party and his own position; for some months he had been engaged in polemics with the Party President, Visentini, after the latter had proposed that the role of the parties in government should be reduced (which many interpreted as an opening to the PCI). Each of the two was thought to have the personal support of between 30 and 35% of the delegates. A further complicating factor was the presence of a significant Sicilian group united more by regional affiliation than ideology, and led by Gunnella (Junior Minister at the MFA). And Compagna, one of the PRI's three Ministers in the Government (whose support for Spadolini would be essential), was known to have a number of allies in wanting a line well to the right of the Secretary's.
4. As it turned out there was no power struggle. Spadolini's opening speech put the emphasis on party unity and held out an unmistakable olive branch to Visentini, which was gratefully accepted. Visentini did not abandon his proposal but came down firmly against the PCI entering government and explained that he did not have in mind a government of 'technicians', merely one in which party interests would be more subordinated to those of the nation. In his final speech Spadolini also made clear that he would not wish to be Secretary of a party split on north/

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south lines, thus ensuring that the Sicilian opposition would not be pressed too hard.

5. The 130 members of the National Council finally voted on 3 motions, and results were as follows:

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|---|---|
| i) Left Wing Republicans (favouring the alternative government of the left proposed by the PCI) | 2% (less than hitherto because deprived of the Sicilian votes, which went this time to Gunnella's group). |
| ii) Gunnella's group  | 16%   |
| iii) Majority (Spadolini, Visentini, the three Ministers, Battaglia etc.)                       | 82%   |

This represented a personal success for Spadolini, whose re-election as Secretary was not opposed, and an endorsement of the party's present policy. But differences of emphasis remain, and the majority is clearly divided into a Visentini wing and a Spadolini wing. There is also a group of Republicans - larger than the 2% left-wing Republicans referred to above, and more influential - who favour greater involvement of the PCI in the government of Italy, rather as the left wing of the DC do.

6. Spadolini is not much of an orator - his style is too academic, with interminable historical references - and even his friends in the party would not call him an inspiring leader of the Ugo La Malfa stamp. He did however demonstrate considerable tactical skill at this Congress and can claim to have avoided a possible damaging split in the party at a time when they have hopes of raising the price of their support for the present coalition. He insisted throughout that the PRI was a party of the left, but he distinguished it sharply from the Marxist tradition, and one looks in vain through the majority motion for socialist elements. The truth is that although the PRI's natural allies are in many respects the non-Communist lay parties, their support among the working class is very limited and continues to decline. Their appeal is rather to the middle class (as the composition of the delegates at the Congress showed) and their real electoral rivals are the PLI. Room for expansion is limited, and any success the party may

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have is likely to be on an electoral base similar to the 3% or so (and concentrated in certain areas) which it has today; Spadolini knows that the only way for him or any other Republican to attain high office is if the larger parties with prior claim fail to agree. It is therefore not surprising that this underlying element of opportunism should lead often to a lack of clarity in the party's policies, as we saw at this Congress.

Yours ever,

R N Culshaw

cc: Mrs K Colvin, Research Dept, FCO

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