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SUMMARY

THE PCI AFTER BERLINGUER

1. Berlinguer presided over Western Europe's biggest Communist party. His importance was only appreciated by many Italians after his unexpected death. Except in moments of crisis his style was to work behind the scenes. But he could be formidable when necessary. And he was honest (paras 1-3).
2. The architect of the "historic compromise" of 1976-78, the possibility of cooperation in government between the Communists and the Christian Democrats (DC), (paras 4-5).
3. Moro's death, a bad election in 1979, and internal criticism within the PCI put an end to the policy. It was replaced in 1980 by the "democratic alternative", the goal of alliance between the PCI and the Socialists (PSI). It appeared to condemn the PCI to perpetual opposition (paras 6-7).
4. Meanwhile, Berlinguer continued to distance himself further from Moscow, and put the PCI firmly in the Western camp. In the June 1984 European Elections the PCI for the first time gained more votes than the DC (para 8).
5. Berlinguer's successor, Natta, though intelligent and experienced, is not of the same calibre. He has to choose between the strategies of perpetual opposition, alliance with the PSI or collaboration with the DC. The first is most likely in the short term, though Italian political problems need something more (paras 9-13).

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6. However Natta chooses, the PCI will remain for the foreseeable future a major Italian political force. It is not an orthodox Communist party, but it represents the bulk of Italian left-wing opinion. It is in our interests that the PCI continues to maintain its independence from Moscow. We need to keep ourselves well informed about it, and encourage contact and understanding (paras 14-17).

6 August 1984



BRITISH EMBASSY,
ROME.
3 August 1984

The Rt Hon Sir G Howe QC MP
LONDON

Sir,

THE PCI AFTER BERLINGUER

1. My telegram 451 analysed the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) choice of Alessandro Natta to succeed Enrico Berlinguer as Secretary General. This despatch seeks to assess Berlinguer's personal achievement and the task which awaits his successor.

Berlinguer

2. Berlinguer became the effective leader of the PCI in 1969 and was at the helm, unrivalled, throughout the troubled seventies. But for his premature death it is likely that he would have remained in office until the end of this decade, such was his popularity with the party's rank and file. Italians only became fully conscious of the indispensable role which Berlinguer had played for the PCI for fifteen years when the party was faced with the unexpected necessity of choosing a successor.

3. Few Communist parties in the past generation have produced a charismatic leader of the classic type and Berlinguer was certainly not one of them. His oratory was effective but humourless and dull; he was not physically impressive, nor endowed with a biting wit like Andreotti; he was too intellectual and came from too prosperous a background to present himself convincingly as the man best qualified to understand the views and aspirations of the working class. Indeed, it has been

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argued that his support for the "historic compromise" with the DC was incompatible with the basic loyalties and instincts of PCI members, and that he later showed a lack of strategic grasp by switching to the diametrically opposed policy of the left wing alternative. His great strengths emerged behind the scenes: organisational ability, appetite for hard work, and above all a cool head in a crisis. For long periods he would lead from behind, mediating between different views or resolving clashes of personality. Then in moments of real difficulty, whether for external reasons (Afghanistan and Poland) or internal (the murder of Moro), he would take a clear position and accept personal responsibility for explaining it to the party and the general public. On such occasions he could be formidable, as a number of interviewers found to their cost. He thus grew both in experience and in prestige. Above all, he was respected for his honesty. There are no scandals linked with his name. Not all those who wept at the news of his collapse were PCI voters; Pertini's reaction was as usual in tune with the emotional response of many Italians.

The Historic Compromise

4. Berlinguer will be remembered above all as the architect of the historic compromise. This envisaged the PCI cooperating with the Christian Democrats (DC) and eventually entering central government with them or at least with their more "acceptable" members. Berlinguer's first obstacle was the ideological opposition of many PCI militants, to whom it seemed a sordid piece of power-broking. Then he had patiently to persuade the DC that it was in the interest of that party to choose the PCI as allies rather than the traditional lay parties; part of this process was the Communists' insistence that Italy could not be governed without them at either local or national level.

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5. The historic compromise came closest to fruition between 1976 and 1978. The DC and the PCI, Italy's two mass parties, between them had over 70% of the vote and could have pushed through Parliament any economic programme on which they agreed, in the wake of the oil crisis, with the additional advantage that the PCI could have done much to secure its acceptance by organised labour. The lay parties were in disarray. Above all, in the face of the serious terrorist threat and of mounting economic problems, many non-Communist writers, industrialists and magistrates were arguing that some form of national government was necessary and that it should not exclude the PCI. Against this background it seemed natural for Andreotti's governments in this period to be sustained by PCI outside support.

The "Democratic Alternative"

6. Moro's death in May 1978 removed Berlinguer's DC co-architect, and the 1979 elections showed the first-ever decline in the PCI vote. Many rashly assumed that the party had peaked in 1976 (at 34.4%) and would continue to decline. It began to look as though Craxi's Socialists (PSI), and even Spadolini's small Republican party, might make some inroads into PCI support. But more serious for Berlinguer was the criticism of his domestic strategy from within the party, especially among the militants who were so vital to the PCI's continuing success. At the same time the mood of the DC changed and there was no longer a majority wishing to go further towards bringing the PCI into central government. With hindsight it can be seen that the half-in, half-out arrangements of 1976-8 suited the DC far more than the PCI, who supported the government without having Ministers to influence it from within.

7. For a year Berlinguer presided over fierce internal PCI debates before announcing in late 1980 that the party would pursue not the historic compromise but the "democratic alternative":

/a government



a government based on a PCI/PSI alliance, but not excluding some left-wing members of the DC and some other parties. This was a recipe for perpetual opposition, since there was never a practical possibility of applying the popular front formula: the Socialists under Craxi had less sympathy than the DC for the PCI; nor was Craxi willing to consider forming a coalition with the PCI in which, with less than a third of its votes, he would be very much the junior partner. Berlinguer also must have known that the international (especially American) reaction to any such Italian government of the left would be fierce and might even bring it down; indeed, his determination to avoid Allende's errors and fate had prompted his original formulation of the historic compromise. But the fundamental reason for the change of course to the "democratic alternative" was not so much to improve the chances of sharing the fruits of office at an early date as to satisfy those in the party who by temperament or ideology preferred opposition, and also to attract new support from those non-Communist voters who wanted to change the DC-dominated system. He could not, however, conceal his disappointment at the failure of the bolder strategy which had been his first choice, and I think he always believed that the road to power lay through the DC.

8. In the June 1983 general elections the party remained static at 30%, but in the European Elections of June 1984 it advanced to 33.3%, overtaking the DC for the first time. Even if Berlinguer's death the week before induced a perhaps temporary sympathy vote, it is a measure of his success that he should have held his party together and broadened its support at a time when other West European communist parties were crumbling. To do so he had to model the PCI even more closely on European Socialist parties such as the German SPD, in the process treading on or even breaking some ideological toes: in Paris he was more comfortable with Mitterand than with Marchais. He also did much to make the party's internal

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workings less arcane. Above all he had to put it firmly in the Western camp, accepting the EC, paying lip service to NATO (the PCI now sends Parliamentarians to the North Atlantic Assembly), and using eloquent spokesmen like Napolitano to persuade Western allies that the PCI's policies posed no threat to them. As a corollary of this "Westernisation", relations with the USSR deteriorated; Berlinguer refused its pretensions to leadership of the Communist movement worldwide, and when after Poland in 1981 he described the October revolution as a "spent force", relations reached a nadir from which they had climbed but little by the time of his death.

Natta

9. Berlinguer's successor is not of the same calibre. His age and past record suggest that he will be less of an innovator and more inclined to continue those policies which have proved successful, such as firm opposition to the present government's economic programme. It is hard to imagine him producing an idea as novel as the historic compromise or persuading the party to accept it. But Natta is too intelligent and experienced to be written off as a temporary expedient; and since the principle of collective decision-making is well established in the party, his appointment is unlikely to lead to any early changes of substance or even of style.

PCI Prospects

10. Berlinguer's success has created Natta's dilemma: where should Western Europe's biggest Communist party, and Italy's biggest party, go from here? We can leave aside the doomsday scenario, of political or economic collapse followed by a government of national salvation which would include or even be led by the PCI. Italy at present is too tranquil for such wild speculation to be valid: nor does it now feature in any PCI analysis. The party must choose between three basic

/strategies:



strategies: perpetual opposition, alliance with the PSI, or collaboration with the DC. Each has its merits and its supporters. Opposition, which has been the PCI's real policy ever since Craxi became Prime Minister, brings electoral benefits. It also absolves the party from responsibility for decisions taken in Rome, while leaving it free to influence them behind the scenes (a constant process) and to dominate local government. Many at the base of the party are more comfortable in opposition after nearly forty years of it. On the other hand its leaders do not see why a party with a third of the vote should abandon all hope of governing and so deprive Italy, alone among major Western countries, of any chance of a real change of national leadership or policy. They also fear giving the party too negative an image. This is why the PCI has in recent years espoused the other two strategies in turn.

11. Alliance with the PSI is not on offer (without some totally unexpected change of heart) as long as Craxi leads it, even though he gets on better with Natta than with Berlinguer. The two parties still collaborate in many local administrations, but the euphoria of the seventies has gone, and in many areas the alliance is now one of convenience. The dispute over Craxi's pay decree opened up some deep scars. Parliamentary arithmetic is also relevant: although in this legislature, for the first time, a left-wing government, broadly defined, could have a majority, it would be wafer thin. Without at least acquiescence from the DC (or part of it) any such experiment would be doomed to failure. But as a rallying cry for the PCI this strategy has some appeal, at least in ideological terms; after all, the PSI symbol still contains a hammer and sickle, and it has a respectable if somewhat distant Marxist past.

12. The third strategy, collaboration with the DC, has the advantage that there are still many Christian Democrats who would be prepared to give it a try in certain circumstances. In theory it could produce the strongest government of the

/Italian



Italian Republic. But the difficulties for Natta, probably sufficient to deter him, are three: the suspicion with which the PCI party base would regard any such deal; the need for the resulting government to produce rapid and tangible results against tax evasion, administrative corruption and so on, since otherwise the PCI's credibility as a party offering something different would suffer; and the opportunity for those parties left outside to usurp the PCI's opposition role and increase their votes. In other words, Natta would have to guard against a repetition of the events of 1976-8.

13. I believe that in the short term Natta's inclination will be to pursue the first strategy (opposition) while continuing to talk in terms of the second (alliance with the PSI). But if the present stalemate in Italian politics is ever to be ended - and it may not end - it will be by some renewed attempt at collaboration between the two mass parties. The lay parties have shown that they have neither the strength nor, with the mutual distrust of Craxi and Spadolini, the unified sense of purpose to provide a credible alternative. The PCI must therefore bide its time, preserve its votes and await a chance of a deal with the DC on favourable terms. It will only achieve this if the DC is weakened further and loses its nerve; and at present, following the European election results, the DC has on the contrary recovered self-confidence. Even then it would require a leader younger and more dynamic than Natta to seize the opportunity because the reaction from the lay parties (not to mention Washington) would be fierce.

14. Whatever tactics they adopt, Italy's Communists will remain for the foreseeable future a force to be reckoned with, similar in size to the DC. The fact is that they have overtaken the DC (the "sorpasso") is not in itself very significant; nor would its reversal be in the next elections. What is important is that the party represents clearly defined sections of the population and inspires a devotion only found elsewhere in

/certain



certain staunchly Catholic areas of the DC. It is also highly organised, from the grass roots up, and commands a respect even from its opponents which is never accorded to the PSI. Berlinguer's funeral was a reminder of both these aspects.

HMG's Policy

15. We must deal with the PCI as it is, not as we would wish it to be. It is not an orthodox Communist party, nor are there any signs that under Natta it will drift back into a closer relationship with the USSR. It will not gradually disappear, leaving the political battleground to be disputed between the DC and the lay parties. It will continue to represent the bulk of left wing opinion in this country, to have great influence on organised labour, and so to limit the choices open to successive Italian governments, and to affect the presentation of government policy.

16. This last point is of some importance to us. Italian politics work by consensus, and the PCI is part of that consensus. As the history of the pay decree showed, if it decides to obstruct government legislation in parliament to the maximum it can bring government almost to a halt. It follows both that this Embassy needs to be well-informed about the party and that we should not be too impatient with Italian governments if they choose not to take a high profile on foreign policy issues - Central America for example, and many Third World problems - where they can anticipate unprofitable political dissent at home. Conversely, the government's quiet, undemonstrative handling of missile deployment at Comiso has been a masterly example of the benefits that the Italian system can on occasion bring.

17. We have virtually no influence on how the party develops. But we (and our EC partners) should lose no opportunity of encouraging it to make its commitment to Western democratic

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values more solid and more permanent. In this I wholly agree with my predecessor (his despatch of 10 November 1982). It is in our own interest that the PCI maintains its independence from Moscow on foreign policy and defence issues in particular. Increased contacts, both in Rome and through visits to Britain by prominent PCI leaders, will help the party to strengthen its identity in the shape which Berlinguer has moulded. So do and will regular exchanges of views, particularly in areas such as defence where there is bound to be disagreement. I shall therefore seek Natta's acquaintance this autumn and my staff, in Rome and in consular posts, will continue to cultivate good PCI contacts at national and local level. There is no reason to expect that the PCI will soon enter central government or have a greater impact on Italian policy: but we must nevertheless be prepared for that day.

18. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives in EC Posts, Washington, UKDel NATO, Moscow, and to Consular representatives in Italy.

I am Sir
Yours faithfully

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