



ITALIAN ELECTIONS: JUNE 1983

SUMMARY

1. The maxim that Italian elections never change anything disproved by an election in which the Christian Democrats lost 5% of their voting share (paragraphs 1 and 2). The main reason was probably a feeling that the Communists were unlikely to form a Government, giving voters greater freedom of choice (paragraph 3).
2. Those who gained were not the Communists, but the smaller parties, notably Signor Spadolini's Republicans. Signor Craxi's Socialists gained less than he had hoped. Votes for the fascists also increased (paragraphs 4 and 5).
3. In the new Parliament Christian Democrat support for a new Government still needed, although Signor Craxi's support for a new five-party coalition is also required (paragraphs 6 and 7).
4. The results have led to public discussion of the electoral system and comparison with the British system. The latter if applied in Italy unlikely to produce a more stable result. But the electoral law is in any case difficult to change, and produces some advantages for Italian democracy which are important in the regions (paragraphs 8 to 12).
5. The election was a landmark in postwar Italian politics. Much now depends on the reaction of the Christian Democrats: will they continue Signor De Mita's line, or retreat to their earlier style? If the latter, which may be the case, they could recapture some of the lost ground. But that could be a short-term advantage (paragraph 13).

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6. Another coalition of the familiar type now likely to govern Italy. But it is debatable whether this will have the authority to take the economic measures required, and even the Italians will find their political skills stretched to maintain stability (paragraph 14).



BRITISH EMBASSY.

ROME.

14 July 1983

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe, QC, MP
LONDON

Sir,

ITALIAN ELECTIONS: JUNE 1983

1. "Italian elections never change anything". That is the first political maxim one hears on arrival in Italy. Throughout the developing sixties and the troubled seventies, the Christian Democrat vote never varied by more than 1%, making this party the essential foundation of every government; the lay parties held on to their traditional electorate; only the Communists made gains, but never sufficient to permit them to construct an alternative government. (The table annexed to this despatch shows the pattern of voting for all major parties since the war.) Italy's system of strict proportional representation (discussed below) ensured that these predictable results were translated into parliaments of astounding similarity. This can be considered political stability or immobility, according to taste.

2. The general elections of 26/27 June disproved the rule, contrary to the general expectation of citizens of all shades of opinion, and upsetting the predictions of the polls. (I had paid more attention to the former, but both were proved wrong in the event: and so was I.) The Christian Democrats lost more than 5%, reducing their lead over the Communists to little more than a million votes for the Chamber (Lower House) and half a million for the Senate. The shock wave in the party has still not subsided. This despatch examines the reason for

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the unexpected Christian Democrat failure, the performance of the other parties, and the shape of the new Parliament.

THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS

3. The Christian Democrats have never hitherto been tied to an economic ideology or to the interests of a particular social class, as my predecessor's despatch of 3 August 1982 on the party makes clear. They have been skilful at appealing in different ways to the diverse elements of Italian society: devout Catholics vote for the "Church party", poor southerners for the party which can guarantee them state benefits, and prosperous northerners for the party best able to keep Communism at bay. But this time the new Christian Democrat leader, Signor De Mita, ran his campaign mainly on the issue of "economic rigour" and the need to combat the economic crisis, making little effort to extol his party's traditional virtues. His deputy, Signor Mazzotta, went further, calling for a centre government which would exclude the Socialists and take firm action to reduce public spending. The system of patronage was used, especially in the south, but in some areas at least, its operation seems to have been less overt and therefore less effective than in the past. Inside the party De Mita's process of "renewal" may help it over time, but had not gone far enough, and disquieted the local organisations on which the mobilisation of its vote depends. De Mita might claim that he did not have sufficient time to explain his vision of a more modern, technocratic DC to the party's traditional supporters. The church this time was less insistent that it was the duty of good Catholics to vote for the Christian Democrats. Above all, before the elections, there was no fear of the Communists becoming the largest party, or of them entering government. Voters felt they had greater freedom of choice. The combination of these factors was sufficient to produce a serious loss of Christian Democrat votes.

/THE OTHER



THE OTHER PARTIES

4. Of the two million people who deserted the Christian Democrats on 26/27 June, most voted instead for the smaller parties (not the Communists). The pattern was fairly even across the country, and the Christian Democrats lost votes even in their traditional strongholds. New voters and young people were not particularly to blame. The Republicans gained most, thanks to Signor Spadolini's personal popularity after his spell as Prime Minister, and the tiny Liberal Party also did well. The economic, defence and foreign policies of these two parties are not very different from those of the Christian Democrats; it is reasonable to assume that their new supporters are people who have long sympathised with them, but who felt obliged in previous elections to vote for the Christian Democrats. (Signor Ugo La Malfa, the late Republican leader, once said that if only everyone who told him they were Republican would vote that way, then his party would be the largest in Italy.) The Socialists, who provoked these elections (not due until June 1984) in the hope of significant gains, were disappointed by the modest success of their manoeuvre in withdrawing support from Signor Fanfani's fifth Government. The lacklustre Social Democrats remained static, gaining some Christian Democrat votes but losing (with the Christian Democrats) part of their traditional electorate to a newly-formed "Pensioners Party". (This did not achieve representation in Parliament, but its half million votes illustrate concern at talk of "rigour" from those who felt threatened.) The Communists did no more than hold on to their faithful supporters, and were relieved to do so after the policy shifts and external shocks (Poland, Afghanistan) of the last four years. They are still a substantial body.

THE PROTEST VOTE

5. A significant number of votes were lost. The turnout

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fell below 90% for the first time; these elections were later in June than ever before, and some voters found the beach more congenial than the polling booth. Blank and spoiled votes were more numerous than in the general elections of 1979, and this must represent a deliberate act of protest. More disturbing is the increase in votes for the neofascist party (MSI) which had been steadily declining since the early seventies: it gained 1½%, and remains Italy's fourth largest party, untouchable in opposition. Finally there was a growth in support for independent local lists and pressure groups like the Pensioners Party, which in most cases failed to reach the level necessary to elect a member of Parliament.

THE NEW PARLIAMENT

6. The results do not represent a swing to the left by the Italian electorate. Signor Berlinguer's proud boast that it is for the first time possible to construct a majority in Parliament without the Christian Democrats would be true only if the Republicans or the Social Democrats were willing to serve in a coalition dominated by the Communists, an unlikely result. Thus a government without Christian Democrat support is still not a practical possibility.

7. On the other hand, the prospect of a "centre" coalition of Christian Democrats, Republicans and Liberals has receded; in the new Parliament it would have less than 45%. This means that Socialist support, or at least benevolent abstention, will continue to be essential to the construction of any workable government majority. Given the unscrupulous way in which Signor Craxi, the Socialist leader, exploited his position during the last Parliament, it is now even more difficult after these elections to envisage a stable coalition or the effective long term planning which the economy needs. One important reason is that the Republicans and Socialists differ strongly

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on economic policy. In consequence, while the weight of the "lay bloc" (Socialists, Republicans, Social Democrats and Liberals) which Signor Craxi aspires to lead has increased in relation to the Christian Democrats, the bloc is not united and there are too many strong personalities pulling in different directions.

THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

8. The Italians themselves are well aware of the weakness of coalition governments, and of the deficiency of electoral laws which permit so many tiny parties to be represented in Parliament. The two go hand in hand. Italy's system of proportional representation has no formal threshold as in the German Federal Republic, although in practice a party with less than 2% of the vote will receive few if any seats. Historic differences, not least between their veteran leaders, prevent even parties very similar in policy and style (like the Republicans and Liberals) from merging. The lesson of Italian elections since the war is in any case that when parties present joint lists, their total vote declines: two plus two makes three rather than four. There is therefore little chance of the parties themselves taking the initiative to reduce their number and make coalition arithmetic less complex.

9. Nor is it likely that the electoral rules themselves will be changed. Depending on the nature of the change, this might involve the amendment of the Constitution, and a broad consensus would certainly be required. This would not be easy to attain, for an historical reason. Italians recall that in 1953 the government passed through Parliament, but was never able to apply, the legge truffa or "swindle law" whereby a coalition of parties winning an absolute majority of the votes for the Chamber would receive two-thirds of the seats: there was an

/outcry



outery at this attempt to copy Mussolini's 1924 legislation. There is another strong reason for keeping the proportional system. Italy's regional diversity makes it very desirable to allow linguistic and other minorities to be represented in Parliament. Thus Trieste, the Veneto, Sardinia, French-speaking Val d'Aosta and German-speaking Alto Adige can all elect their own representatives, owing allegiance to no major party. Memories of fascism make Italian politicians reluctant to limit the right of such small groups to Parliamentary seats; they would rather accept the confusion which can result. I therefore expect the present system to continue.

10. It is tempting to speculate on the results which a 'first past the post' method might produce in Italy. Much would depend on the reaction of the parties and on how the constituencies were drawn. But I am not sure that the result would prove any happier. A system of that kind would probably present the voter with a starker choice between the two large parties, and could be expected to lead to the virtual elimination of the smaller parties which have made a useful contribution to Italian political life. An election could well produce a Parliament in which the Christian Democrats and Communists held blocks of seats of almost equal size, with the balance in the hands of Signor Craxi's PSI. That would be an inherently unstable condition.

11. With the British and Italian elections so close in time, press and political comment on the differences between the two electoral systems was inevitably widespread. One aspiring socialist lady Senator was heard comparing the British system to the 1953 "swindle law" in a public address. The small parties predictably attacked our system, whereas some Christian Democrats cautiously indicated support without pressing the point too hard. The coincidence of the two election dates has sharpened public awareness here of the difference between the

/concepts



concepts of "governability", ie assisting a majority government to emerge, and "representativeness", ie giving weight to minority views. The speed of our electoral process also attracted comment, for the most part favourable. But although I have heard many Italians say that they would prefer an electoral system which made the formation of governments easier, and gave them a firmer position in Parliament, I do not think that our system is regarded as more equitable than their own. Nor, for the reasons given above, is it likely to be easy to change the current electoral law, even if limited to the introduction of a 5% threshold of the German type.

12. Two other consequences of the Italian electoral system deserve comment. First, political commentators and the general public, unused to large swings in votes or seats, are over-impressed by small changes in the voting pattern which could pass almost unnoticed elsewhere. This accounts for the public amazement at the Christian Democrats' decline this time. Second, the system of preference voting for the Chamber, whereby electors may indicate their favourite candidates on their chosen party's list, acquires great importance: this decides who will be elected, and creates for the Deputy some sense of personal responsibility to his electorate. The level of preference voting is higher in the south, where patronage and clientelism play a bigger role in politics; in these elections the Foreign Minister, Signor Emilio Colombo (in Basilicata) received proportionately the highest number of preferences; his was also one of the only two regions where the Christian Democrat vote rose.

CONCLUSION

13. The Christian Democrat losses make these elections an important landmark in the history of Italian post-war politics.

/Much



Much now depends on how the party reacts. It may continue to present the electorate with specific policies as advocated by Signor De Mita, for example to reduce the public sector deficit; or it may turn backwards to its traditional appeal, with vaguer evocations of Catholic values and economic self-interest. The heart of the matter is whether the Christian Democrats should become - or will be forced to become - a classic European centre-right party, or whether, despite all the social changes in this country, they can go on repeating the style and vote-winning methods which have won them such broad-based consent in the past. We cannot yet tell whether the party will face up to this question or prefer to sidestep it. It is too early to write off De Mita's experiment; his Christian Democrat opponents bequeathed him a demoralised party last year and there is no reason to suppose that they would do better if again in the saddle. My own view is that it may be difficult for the Christian Democrats to pursue policies of the kind advocated by De Mita as members of a coalition which includes Craxi, and may well be led by him. The party may thus be obliged to change back to its traditional style; it was after all one of Craxi's main objectives in the campaign to prevent the Christian Democrats from becoming a centre-right party. If so, it is possible that they will recapture some of the votes they have lost this time, at the next general elections, because so many Italian voters fear the possible consequences of Communist domination of Italian politics. But the traditional Catholic voters are a steadily declining force, I believe, in many parts of the country, and I doubt if that posture would do them much good in the long run.

14. It is also too early to offer an opinion about the likely duration of this ninth legislature. A comment frequently heard during the election campaign was that, however you felt

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about the decision to call early elections, once they were over the political situation would be easier since there could not possibly be elections again for several years. I cannot say that this prophecy has been borne out by the events. Rather it seems that the increased ungovernability which is the main result of the election is likely to be the cause of another anticipated election in due course. For the lifetime of this Parliament, however, Italy seems doomed to the uninspiring coalition options of the past four years: the only novelty will be who leads them. This is bad news for the Italian economy, but is moderately reassuring on the broader political fronts of defence and foreign affairs. Italians might recall the Prince's comment in "Il Gattopardo" as a fitting epitaph for these elections: "It is necessary to change everything, so that everything can stay the same". But I am not sure that this would be the correct view, because so much will depend on the political handling of the many economic problems facing the next Italian Government, and on their international economic setting. It remains to be seen whether another traditional Italian political combination can operate effectively to check the rapidly advancing government deficit and the high rate of inflation. It is very much in our interest that this should happen, since we too have a lot at stake in a prosperous and stable Italian democracy. But it will require all the Italian skills of political manipulation to ensure that the Prince's epitaph applies.

15. I am copying this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassadors to all EC countries, to Washington, to the European Communities, and to the Holy See.

I am Sir,
Yours faithfully,

Bridges

Bridges

ITALIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS 1948-1983 : RESULTS OF THE MAIN PARTIES

PARTY	1948	1953	1958	1963	1968	1972	1976	1979	1983
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
DC Christian Democrats	48.5	40.9	42.3	38.3	39.1	38.8	38.7	38.3	32.9
PSDI Social Democrats	7.1	4.5	4.6	6.1	) 14.5	5.1	3.4	3.8	4.1
PSI Socialists	) 31.0	12.7	14.2	13.8		9.6	9.6	9.8	11.4
PCI Communists		22.6	22.7	25.3	26.9	27.2	34.4	30.4	29.9
PRI Republicans	2.5	1.6	1.4	1.4	2.0	2.8	3.1	3.0	5.1
PLI Liberals	3.8	3.0	3.5	7.0	5.8	3.9	1.3	1.9	2.9
PR Radicals	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.1	3.4	2.2
MSI/DN Neo-fascists	2.0	5.8	4.8	5.1	4.5	8.7	6.1	5.3	6.8

ITALIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS 1948-1983 - SEATS OBTAINED BY MAIN PARTIES IN THE CHAMBER

PARTY	1948	1953	1958	1963	1968	1972	1976	1979	1983
DC Christian Democrats	305	263	273	260	266	266	263	262	225
PSDI Social Democrats	33	19	22	33	) 91	29	15	20	23
PSI Socialists	) 183	75	84	87		61	57	62	73
PCI Communists		143	140	166	177 (+PSIUP)	179	227	201	198
FRI Republicans	9	5	6	6	9	15	14	16	29
PLI Liberals	19	13	17	39	31	20	5	9	16
PR Radicals	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	18	11
MSI/DN Neo-fascists	14	40(Mon)* 29(MSI)	14(Mon)* 24(MSI) 11(Mon)*	27(MSI) 8(Mon)*	24(MSI) 6(Mon)*	56	35	30	42
	574	590	596	630	630	630	630	630	630

* Mon = Monarchists (2 rival parties in 1958)

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

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28 July 1983

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cc: Mrs. K. Gelvin, Research Dept
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The Lord Bridges KCMG

ROME

John Taylor

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THE ITALIAN ELECTIONS

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1. Thank you for your Despatch of 14 July and its reflections on the outcome of Italy's General Election. I am making arrangements for it to be printed.
2. I cannot imagine that any party, other than perhaps the PRI, was satisfied with its own performance in the election. There was a certain rough justice in that, though it was hard luck on De Mita. Nor for that matter could the vast majority of the electorate have been pleased at the outcome. De Mita received no thanks for setting out on a path of renewal for the DC; Craxi can hardly take heart from the fact that the PSI vote increased by less than 2%, and Berlinguer cannot seriously interpret the PCI result as a success. The Communists, after all, did no more than hold their ground. Nor, I assume, can the neo-Fascists be under any illusion as to why their own support increased, although in their case the party fortunes could provide an interesting area for further analysis.
3. I share your doubts about the future government of Italy in the light of the election result. It will be interesting to see how Craxi, if successful, copes as a Premier, having acted with such notable selfishness and lack of care for longer term Italian interests in making life so difficult for former holders of the post. He could hardly refuse the Premiership after all that has been said but if he can secure it he will have some difficult and personally unpalatable decisions to face on the economy. I wonder how good he will be at eating his words - or will he hope to be in for a brief period of popularity before making way for others? (A tricky manoeuvre.) If he lasts through the autumn, he will have to preside over the installation of the Cruise missiles. The DC will have no interest in allowing him to be successful for long, nor will the PCI. Spadolini, for his own reasons, may also take pleasure in seeing Craxi struggle. The extent to which the DC seek to make life difficult for Craxi may be an interesting gauge of the Party's morale. On the other hand, the PSI is an essential component of a governing majority, so the others will have to square the Socialists somehow. Perhaps they hope to draw Craxi's teeth by giving him responsibility?



4. If Craxi's main argument for accepting the Palazzo Chigi was to prevent a rightward drift by the DC, his present course of action can perhaps be justified to his supporters, but even if he succeeds in forming the next administration, I would not give him long.

5. More interesting, as your Despatch makes clear, is the long-term outlook for the Christian Democrats. They can go backward or forward, but neither course guarantees the return of their lost votes. I am inclined to agree that the problem is a deep-rooted one of identity. One only has to spend a short time in Italy to realise that people's attitudes are changing, as the recent Economist survey made clear. The DC must change with the times, but will find it difficult to shake off its old image. Even if the Pope had been an Italian, and prepared to speak out on behalf of the Party, his appeals would these days fall largely on deaf ears. Italian society is becoming more secularised, Italian women more emancipated and the attitudes of tomorrow's voters less conditioned by the Catholic Church. If the DC are set on long-term secular decline the implications are profound.

6. You rightly stressed our interest in stable government in Italy. Its importance in the NATO and EC contexts are obvious enough, and crises on the Italian political scene interfere all too frequently with our bilateral contacts, making it difficult to look ahead with any certainty. Our eagerness to promote collaborative ventures like the Round Table is tempered by the knowledge that so much depends on the whim of Italy's politicians. Meetings are cancelled at short notice, and Ministers here make less effort to see Italian colleagues when a different (if often familiar) face appears at each meeting. We shall do what we can to counteract this, and have the idea of an early meeting between the Secretary of State and the new Italian Foreign Minister well in mind. The last Summit was also useful and I trust convenient dates can be found in due course for the next without wounding Italian self-esteem. But the difficulties in building up Anglo-Italian relations are obvious and we shall need to continue to work at the partnership. (May I, incidentally, add my thanks to those of the PUS for your very useful response of 12 July to his earlier letter?) It would have been a relief if this latest anticipated election had achieved something, but instead of clearing the political air, it has served only to reveal further clouds on the horizon.

7. The immediate battle will be with Italy's economic difficulties; we shall await with interest your first assessment of how the new administration, once in office, is setting about this critical task. That ought to show whether Craxi, if he is Prime Minister, is more than a sharp tactician. How he behaves

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if he has to forego the Premiership this time will also be crucial. Perhaps you might let us have in due course a further assessment of what he and his Party may be seeking to achieve. * We shall naturally also continue to be interested in your reporting on De Mita and the development of the DC. The central importance of this is obvious.

Yours ever

A M Wood

A M Wood
Western European Department

* Written before I saw your telegram No 354,
for which many thanks.

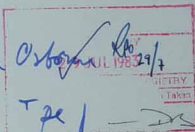
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FROM: A M Wood, Head of WED
DATE: 28 July 1983

Mr James ✓



THE ITALIAN ELECTIONS

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1. I submit Lord Bridges' Despatch of 14 July on the Italian General Elections. Advance copies have been distributed to interested Private Offices and Under-Secretaries, and I shall arrange for the Despatch to be printed in the Departmental series. My comments on the Despatch are set out in my reply to the Ambassador, which also incorporates comments from other interested FCO Departments.

B

2. The next few days will be crucial for Signor Bettino Craxi, the Socialist Party leader, in his attempts to put together a new five-party coalition government. Although he already has agreement in principle from his potential partners to his Prime Ministership, no decisions have yet been taken on the Government's programme or on the division of Ministerial posts. Even at this stage, and despite reports that he is making rapid progress, Signor Craxi could easily founder on a hidden rock.

A M Wood

Thank you.

Coy 28/7/83