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On identity account

ITALY INTERNAL: DC

I had lunch yesterday with D'Onofrio, De Mita's adviser on local party affairs. When I last saw him before the elections he was full of hope. Yesterday he was crestfallen. He said that the results had come as a complete surprise to him, to all other DC leaders (including the Forlaniani) and indeed to opinion formers throughout Italy. When the polls closed in Naples, he was sitting having a coffee, and some PSI and PSDI colleagues came up to him to say ruefully that the DC must have scored a huge triumph. A Mattino journalist had predicted that D'Onofrio would get twice as many votes as he did (he just scraped into the Senate).

2. He gave me his own interpretation of what went wrong. Society was changing faster in Italy than the DC, and especially the Forlaniani, cared to admit. In particular, the results in the cities had been uniformly bad; he said that all his and De Mita's hopes of a DC campaign to wrest back the urban vote had been "set back by years". More generally, voters throughout Europe in the last decade had tended to vote against the government in office. Britain was an exception, but only because the Labour Party offered no alternative. Elsewhere, voters were protesting against recession and unemployment; and in Italy the DC had been penalised as the party of permanent power. Then there was the fact that the PCI no longer seemed a great threat. This (as we have reported) made voters feel freer to choose a smaller party. I noted that the Forlani minority was arguing that De Mita had made a great tactical error by attacking the Socialists rather than the Communists during the campaign. He said that De Mita had attacked PCI economic policies trenchantly, but that on other subjects silence had been the best course. It would have done the West no good, for example, if the DC had made INF and Comiso a rallying cry; if they had then still lost, the vote would have been portrayed as an endorsement of PCI defence policies. I agree with this; the silence on defence issues during the election was not accidental.

3. He mentioned two other important factors. The DC had mis-handled some contentious issues affecting interests that normally might vote their way. Cash registers in shops had become compulsory only a month before the elections; shopkeepers and traders hated them, and many of these votes had probably gone to the PLI and MSI. Scotti's promised action against "baby pensioners" had also upset a number of DC working women, and the PSDI had then claimed credit for watering the action down.

4. Secondly, De Mita's fundamental mistake had been that while he was anxious to improve and modernise the DC's image, his policies only appealed to a comparatively narrow class of journalists, industrialists, and other opinion formers. Forlani was right to say that the mass of voters had been excluded from De Mita's calculations, though he had drawn the wrong conclusions. The voters in the provinces had read all the fine words from Rome, and then compared them to the reality on the ground: ageing, inefficient and corrupt DC party machines, holding out no promise of renewal. It reminded him of the maxim that revolutions begin not when the people are thoroughly down-trodden but when they are promised change and betterment. But the answer was not to retreat to the DC of the 1950's but to press ahead with change.

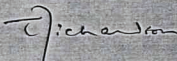
5. D'Onofrio linked this analysis with that of the voting results in different regions. Those who had abandoned the DC in the South were not the same as the northern deserters. In the South, clientilism still ruled, but the PSI could play that game as well as the DC - and in places like Bari had done so. In the North, Spadolini's victories in Milan and Turin were of enormous significance and must be worrying Craxi. Many of these new Republicans were former DC voters discontented with the local party machines. On the other hand he knew of many first-time DC voters in the big cities who had been impressed by De Mita, Carli's nomination and so on. That led to the worrying conclusion that the DC's loss of votes was more than 6% in gross as distinct from net terms. In some areas he thought that 15% of former DC voters might have deserted. Spadolini had not achieved all that much in office (cf what La Ganga told me) but that was something which professional politicians perhaps made too much of; for the ordinary voter he represented honesty in public life.

6. I asked him about De Mita. He said De Mita was insisting on reading every letter (and there were thousands) which reached Palazzo di Gesu on the election results. The vast majority of those who wrote to explain why they had not voted DC this time had cited the recession, corruption, other general issues: barely 2%, he thought, had argued that the DC was being too soft on the PCI and this too tended to undermine the Forlani/Donat Cattin thesis. I asked if De Mita was still in a state of shock. He said no, but De Mita had told him of his private nightmare; he could not stand up before the party and explain to it how he was going to win back those missing votes. I find this revealing.

7. I asked how long De Mita could survive. He said - and I am sure he is right - that the next DC Congress to be held just before the European elections of summer 1984 could be the most decisive in its postwar history. The party could still be in a state of shock, and it would be worried about the European elections in which last time round it had polled 3% less than its national average. There was an enormous amount to be done to get the party in fighting trim before then.

8. He agreed that the DC had to swallow a Craxi presidency. What was the alternative? A left wing coalition? Early elections with further DC losses, especially if held responsible for provoking them? (a nice touch this: Craxi tossing the poisoned chalice of provoking early elections to the DC). To cheer him up, I asked if the DC was not likely to win back pensioners', Liga Veneta etc. votes. He did not seem sure, repeating that above all the DC needed time to put itself in order. On the alternative, I said that surely the PRI and PSDI would not join a PCI-led coalition, and without them it had no majority. He said we should not forget that the PCI had discovered austerity long before De Mita; their acceptance of it during the period of historic compromise had cost them votes in 1979, just as De Mita was now suffering. But this would not stop Berlinguer from espousing austerity again if he could attract the Republicans into a majority. The real divide between left and centre-left, fortunately for Italy, remained foreign and defence policy. In this context, he was not worried by Craxi's remarks yesterday about promoting world peace this autumn. If a DC politician had uttered such a platitude no one would have paid the slightest attention. (I did not ask him about Lagorio's far more pointed statement reported in Wednesday's press)

9. I am reporting separately some points on the local results. D'Onofrio himself will probably go to the Senate's First Commission, on constitutional affairs. He is new to big-time politics, and still speaks frankly. What interested me most in his analysis were his remarks about the DC base. The Forlani group's line (see Pansa's article in Repubblica of 21 July) is that many local DC leaders are viscerally anti-PSI; it was De Mita's fault that he encouraged instead of restraining them; and he frightened voters off by preaching austerity. D'Onofrio's and therefore De Mita's line is that the process of renewal had not gone far enough and that the ordinary voter, who wanted it, did not believe in it. There is bound now to be a long process of introspection.

  
T L Richardson

22 July 1983