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THE ITALIAN IMPASSE

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Summary: The main losers in Italy's premature national elections were the Communists (PCI), who lost four percentage points compared with their high water mark of 34.4 per cent in 1976. But the Christian Democrats (DC), who were expected to make corresponding gains, also suffered a slight loss, while the third-ranking Socialists gained only 0.2 per cent. The retreat from the polarization which marked the 1976 elections was manifested in the gains made by the smaller parties -- Social Democrats, Republicans, Liberals, and Radicals (who, as an up-and-coming "party of protest," drew votes from Communists and Socialists). The PCI, while maintaining its long-term objective of an "historic compromise," now seems likely to go into an opposition that will probably be of the "constructive" type. A key role will be played by the socialist PSI: its participation or support (direct or indirect) will be necessary if a DC-led coalition is to have a working majority.

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Opinion polls and political observers agreed that Western Europe's strongest communist party would lose votes in the national elections held on June 3 and 4; and they were right. But in other respects the electorate proved them wrong. Most polls also predicted that the Christian Democrats (DC), would gain votes while the Communists lost; one poll published on the eve of the elections predicted the DC would soar from the 38.3 per cent it received in 1976 to a stunning 43.5 per cent. (1) Instead, they suffered a slight loss. There was also general agreement that the smaller, "lay" parties -- with the exception of the noisy, up-and-coming Radicals -- would continue to lose ground or stagnate as they had done at the previous elections in 1976; in fact, they made gains.

Taking the results for the Chamber of Deputies, which give a more accurate picture of a party's electoral strength than those for the Senate, the following table shows that Italian voters have withdrawn from the polarization which was such a striking feature of the 1976 elections and have strengthened the moderate center.

Election Results in the Chamber of Deputies (2)						
Party	Percentage			Seats		
	1976	1979	Change	1976	1979	Change
Christian Democrats	38.7	38.3	-0.4	263	262	- 1
Communists	34.4	30.4	-4.0	228	201	- 27
Socialists	9.6	9.8	+0.2	57	62	+ 5
MSI (Neo-fascist)	6.1	5.3	-0.8	35	30	- 5
Social Democrats	3.4	3.8	+0.4	15	20	+ 5
Radicals	1.1	3.4	+2.3	4	18	+ 14
Republicans	3.1	3.0	-0.1	14	16	+ 2
Liberals	1.3	1.9	+0.6	5	9	+ 4
Proletarian Unity	1.5	1.4	-0.1	6	6	-

- (1) This poll by the Doxa organization, published in L'Espresso of June 3, gave the following estimates (in per cent): Christian Democrats 43.5 (+4.8), Communists 29.5 (-4.9), Socialists 10.0 (+0.4), Social Democrats 3.4 (-0.4), Republicans 3.0 (-0.1), Liberals 1.0 (-0.3), Radicals 3.5 (+2.4), PDUP and New Left 1.5 (unchanged), MSI 3.5 (-2.6).
- (2) Omitted from this table are very small parties and local parties, notably the South Tyrol Volkspartei which, with 0.6 per cent (0.5 per cent in 1976), went from 3 to 4 seats.

Generally speaking, the results for the Senate showed the same tendencies, though with some anomalies because of the different voting system. For example, the Christian Democrats lost 0.8 per cent of their Senate vote, but nevertheless gained three seats. But the over-all picture remains the same: the DC held its ground instead of making the expected gains; the PCI fell back but not as much as its leaders may have feared (down four of the seven percentage points it had gained in 1978); the Socialists (PSI), who had hoped to become something like a "third force" capable of playing a new role between DC and PCI, failed to improve significantly on their disappointing 1976 figure (up 0.2 per cent); the smaller centrist parties, on the other hand, did make significant gains (even the Republican Party, down 0.1 per cent in the House vote, gained two seats, whereas a gain of 0.7 per cent in the Senate vote brought it no new seats).

Also of interest was the rise of the Radical Party, led by the exuberant Marco Panella, which tripled its vote, from 1.1 per cent to 3.4 per cent, going from 4 to 14 seats. It seems probable that these gains were made largely at the expense of the Socialists -- "protest" votes which instead of going to the PS on the strength of its "third force" image went instead to the PR -- and the Communists. Finally, at the extremes of the political spectrum, the neofascist MSI did better than expected, losing only 0.8 per cent (but five seats) despite a split, while the leftist Proletarian Unity (PDUP) held its ground and all its six seats. (3)

One development worth noting is the marked increase in the number of abstentions, blank votes, and spoiled votes, which may be taken as indicating widespread frustration, disaffection, and discontent with politicians in general. In the voting for the Chamber of Deputies these three categories together brought the number of "missing" votes to a total, unprecedented for Italy, of 5,657,428.

But what does all this mean in practical political terms? Can an over-all pattern be discerned? How is Italy now to be governed (or misgoverned)? How do the results affect the fortunes of the individual parties, especially the two giants surrounded by pygmies (DC and PCI)? To answer these questions we must look more closely at the outcome of these elections.

Communist Losses

Politically, the most important aspect of the elections is the setback suffered by the Italian Communist Party. It is true that the PCI leadership had expected considerable losses compared with the highpoint of 34.4 per cent reached in 1976, and the calculation that later elections would have meant even greater losses could have been one factor behind the decision to precipitate a crisis by withdrawing support from the DC government. The PCI can, indeed, be relieved that it has retained nearly half the gains made in 1976, and particularly that it has avoided falling back behind the psycho-

- (3) Rival groups competed on both the extreme right and far-left; but on the right the more extreme MSI easily beat the more moderate National Democracy (no seats). On the left the more moderate PDUP outpolled the "New United Left" by five to three (and in seats by six to nothing).

logically significant 30 per cent mark. Nevertheless, of even greater psychological significance is the fact that the PCI's steady political ascent has ended after three decades with its most serious postwar setback. What one might call the "bandwagon effect" -- the widespread impression that the PCI represents the wave of the future -- has been greatly weakened if not destroyed.

Moreover, even if the loss of votes is perhaps less than might have been feared under the circumstances, the way in which it occurred must cause concern to the communist leadership. A comparison of the voting figures for the two chambers shows that the party has been losing its former hold on the politically important 18 to 25 age group -- young people who are eligible to vote for the Chamber of Deputies but not for the Senate. The PCI lost 4 per cent in the Chamber, but only 2.3 per cent in the Senate -- unlike the DC and Socialist Party, which did about the same in both. A spokesman for the party's youth organization, PGCi, is quoted (4) as saying that "30.54 per cent of the youth between 18 and 25 voted for us, whereas in 1976 we reached almost 40 per cent." Since the PCI has paid a good deal of attention to these young people (for example, by denouncing the scandalously high rate of unemployment among them), this decline of a traditional source of strength will call for anxious analysis. It seems probable that the greater part of these "disaffected" young voters turned either to the two groupings to the left of the PCI or to the Radical Party.

The Communists can, indeed, count the DC's failure to make the expected progress as a victory of sorts. During the election campaign Berlinguer(5) and other PCI spokesmen repeatedly stressed the need to prevent the DC from making significant gains in order, it was said, to encourage "progressive" and discourage "reactionary" forces within the party. (It is hardly necessary to add that the apparent criterion for these categories was readiness or refusal to contemplate some measure of political co-operation with the PCI.) So if the main headline in l'Unità of June 5 hailed the consolidation of the "great force" of the PCI at over 30 per cent, the secondary headline proclaimed the failure of "the attempt to restore the unchallenged hegemony of the DC."

The communist argument that the DC's failure to progress would encourage the elements within the DC more open to co-operation with the Communists must, however, be questioned. On the contrary, it seems likely that the tendency opposed to closer co-operation with the PCI and especially to its entry into the government is now considerably stronger within the DC. Il Giornale, which backed 118 DC candidates on the basis of their firm commitment to oppose any governmental agreement with the PCI, was able to report (June 6) that 98 of the 118 had been elected. This strengthening of the anticommunist tendency is also a setback for Secretary Zaccagnini and Premier Andreotti who, while rejecting the communist demand for participation in the government, continued to stress the need for

(4) La Stampa, 7 June 1979.

(5) In an interview in La Stampa of May 26 Berlinguer said that electors who wanted a "renewed and more open" DC should deny the party their vote, since "more votes for the present DC would mean encouraging those more closed forces which have now gained the upper hand within it."

"democratic unity," which seemed to indicate their hope that some kind of programmatic agreement with the PCI could be reached without admitting it into a coalition. The veteran Mario Segni, of the DC right wing, has declared that "the policy of national unity" followed by the DC leadership has been rejected by the electorate, and that there must now be "a reversal of tendency within the DC." This internal struggle over "the communist question" will undoubtedly continue until the DC congress, due in September.

In this situation a key role will be played by the third largest political formation, the Socialist Party (PSI). Under a dynamic new leader, Bettino Craxi, it had sought to build itself up as a sort of "third force" between DC and PCI, a party of the left appealing also to the center, and prepared to co-operate with, or criticize, either of the "Big Two." Craxi had spoken of the PCI's "equidistance" from the DC and the PCI, and at the same time accused the two bigger parties of "hiding behind their apparent electoral hostility the objective of an Italian Yalta," (6) *i.e.*, a division of political power. The Socialists, Craxi explained, supported communist entry into the government but had to accept the fact that the Christian Democrats firmly refused to accept this. In a PSI Central Committee speech in early May, and again at a press conference on May 22, Craxi offered the electorate what he called a "contract": if socialist strength increased by two percentage points (a million votes), the party would guarantee the country five years of "stability and governability" by joining a DC-led coalition, but not, however, in a subordinate position. For the Communists, this meant that Craxi's goal was to "reconstruct a privileged relationship with the DC." (7)

The PSI's rise from 9.6 per cent to 9.8 per cent was certainly not the substantial progress for which Craxi had asked, but its bargaining position is fortified by its increased parliamentary strength of five more deputies and three more senators. Moreover, unlike the PCI, the PSI can now choose between varying degrees of involvement with a governing coalition. The PCI must now stand by its slogan, "in the government or in opposition," which certainly means going into opposition. The Socialists, on the other hand, have a number of options open: they can join the government, extracting from the DC the highest price possible in return; they can pledge not to bring the government down ("abstentionism") as the PCI did in 1976-1977; or they can join a programmatic "majority," without entering the government, as the PCI did in 1977-1978.

The central fact seems to be that the Christian Democrats need the Socialists, as a matter of parliamentary arithmetic. The caretaker coalition of the DC with two smaller parties, the Social Democrats (PSDI) and the Republicans (PRI), has been slightly increased by six seats, to 298; but this is still considerably short of a working majority in a house of 630. The PSI's 62 seats would give it a clear majority of 360, and the effect would be the same if it pledged "abstention" (not to vote against the coalition). On the day after the elections Craxi let it be known that he was prepared under certain conditions to pledge at least abstention to a new "bridge" government which would remain in office until the Christian Democratic

(6) Il Giornale, 13 May 1979.

(7) See Paolo Franchi, "L'Incerta Posizione del PSI," Rinascita, 18 May 1979.

congress in September (which would clarify power and policy relationships within the DC), and perhaps even until next year's regional elections. (8) One of the conditions had already been made known by Craxi during the election campaign: that Mario Andreotti should not be premier. This operation would, however, present political risks for Craxi; the left wing of his divided party could be expected to challenge his leadership if he took a course that would take it away from the PCI and toward the DC.

The Communist Question

Even if a center-left government can be formed with socialist participation or support, direct or indirect, it would be rash to make predictions about its strength, stability, or probable life span. It would be a rather safer bet that the legislature which is now beginning will be the fourth in succession to end prematurely. It would also be risky to proclaim with assurance that the PCI's withdrawal into opposition is the end of a chapter. For one thing, it remains to be seen whether the party's posture in opposition will be aggressive or "positive."

In his declaration on the election results Berlinguer admitted his party's "appreciable losses," welcomed the fact that the DC had failed to make the progress it expected, and then added: "What is certain is that all political forces find themselves faced, as before, with the communist question." True; but the way in which the question is put has changed. The issue of communist participation in national government has been settled for the time being. With regard to this, the President of the DC, Flaminio Piccoli, has said: "The PCI treated this election as a referendum on its entry into government. It has had its answer from the electorate." (9) A statement issued by the PCI directorate on June 5 reiterated the PCI's claim to participation in government, but said that otherwise it would stay in opposition.

Nevertheless, the role and attitude of the PCI, even in opposition, will continue to be of great importance. The party's argument that its contribution is needed if Italy is to have any chance of overcoming its grave and complex socioeconomic problems has not lost its cogency with the electoral setback. With an important series of new three-year labor contracts now being negotiated, communist influence in the trade unions could be of decisive importance one way or the other -- for restraint or militance. The Communists will

(8) See Report by Francesco Damata, Il Giornale, 6 June 1979.

(9) This statement may, however, be open to question. In the Doxa poll mentioned above (Footnote 1), respondents were asked to state their preferences for a center-left coalition without the PCI (DC+PSI+PRI+PSDI) or with it. The first (without the PCI) was chosen by 40.5 per cent and the second by 45.5 per cent. See Cristina Mariotti, "Vuoi Vedere Che Votano Così?," L'Espresso, 3 June 1979, pp. 18-23.

also retain their power to block or facilitate legislation in parliamentary commissions. Moreover, on the local as distinct from the national level, the PCI is already a party of government helping to run the country, and will be anxious to maintain that image of responsibility with a view to next year's regional, provincial, and municipal elections. Sunday's direct elections to the European Parliament, for which the party has campaigned vigorously, will weigh on the same side of the balance.

If the PCI has long described itself as "a party of government and of struggle," there may now be a shift from the first component toward the second, not least in response to the frustrations of the rank and file. But basically the party has no alternative strategy: it must continue its "long march through the institutions," accepting the downs with the ups, and rejecting the "left alternative" in favor of the now-distant "historic compromise."

Perhaps the real question is how Italy will fare during a period when the clouds of social and economic crisis are gathering again. A country in need of vigorous structural reforms finds itself in what looks rather like a political impasse.

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