

When Italy Gets Blue

by Michael Curtis



What is there to say and what is there to do? Can we help but rejoice that a land such as Italy came to be? Its treasures, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Giuseppe Verdi, have given infinite pleasure. By contrast, the political world, as indicated by the result of the parliamentary election in Italy on March 4, 2018, is conspicuous by uncertainty, unpredictability, and deadlock, making government tenure more precarious than the city of Venice threatened by high water. The problem now is to end deadlock by wedlock or arranged marriage of the political parties, none of which has majority support, in the forthcoming fragmented hung parliament.

Some features of the result are clear: a surge in popular electoral support for populist and far right parties; a distaste for establishment parties; a decline in the center left and social democracy; a rise in Euroskepticism that may affect the Brexit EU negotiations with Britain; and above all opposition to immigration, a conviction which may coincide

with the attitude of President Donald Trump.

There may be no second acts in American lives, but there are examples of comeback performances in Italy, a country that has witnessed 64 governments in the last 70 years. The most arresting exempification of this second time around is Silvio Berlusconi, the 81 year old *Il Cavaliere*, charismatic abominable showman of business and politics. Starting his career as a seller of vacuum cleaners, as crooner, fan of Nat King Cole, with large repertoire in night clubs and cruise ships, he became a billionaire reputed to be worth \$8.7 billion, succeeding as a construction and real estate mogul, owner of a cable TV and broadcasting empire, newspapers and publishing house, the A.C. Milan football team until last year, and as a politician who reached the top.

Berlusconi's second act should come as no surprise since he once modestly identified himself as "the Jesus Christ of politics. ... I sacrifice myself for everyone."

Perhaps as part of that sacrifice he entered politics, he said, because the "heirs of the communists were about to seize power after demolishing democracy with the political use of justice." In 1993 he founded Forza Italia (Go Italy), named after a battle cry at Italian soccer games, and became prime minister for nine years in four governments. During that period he had a colorful, notorious private life, involved in sex scandals, so called "*bunga, bunga*," with showgirls and with a 17 year-old Moroccan belly dancer. That striking life style is still evident, now that his current girl friend is 49 years younger than he.

In 2013 Berlusconi was convicted of tax fraud, sentenced to a term of four years, but was not sent to prison because of his age. He was, however, stripped of his seat in the Senate and prevented from holding office until 2019. Nevertheless, even with face lifts, changed skin, facial features and hair, he remained a strong personality, involved in political affairs,

including a friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin with whom he shared holidays, and with whom he visited Crimea in 2015. Ever the optimist, Berlusconi proclaimed his motto, "carry the sun in your pocket to offer it to all the people you meet."

He scored an early victory in his political comeback when in November 2017 he backed and campaigned for a center-right coalition that included Forza Italia that was successful in the Sicily Regional election, gaining 39% of the vote, against the 35% of the Five Star Movement and the center left Democratic Party.

In the general parliamentary election held on March 4, 2018, he supported a similar center-right coalition, allying his Forza Italia with the League headed by Matteo Salvini and with the Brothers of Italy led by Giorgia Meloni against the same political forces, moderate, left, and far right. He campaigned indefatigably on a platform to cut taxes, raise pensions, increase infrastructure spending, boost welfare payments, but above all anti-immigrant policy.

However, the 2018 election result has relegated Berlusconi from expected center stage to the wings. Forza got only 14% of the vote compared with the 17% of the League, and 4% for the Brothers. The largest number, and the implicit winner, is the 5 Star Movement with 32%. The biggest loser is the Democratic Party which in 2014 had 40% of the vote, but was reduced to 19% in 2018.

Berlusconi is therefore no eminence grise and his attempted political resurgence was not a triumph. He was overtaken as leader of his own coalition by Matteo Salvini, 44 year old former left winger from Milan who reinvented himself to become the leader of the anti-immigrant party, the League, formerly the Northern League. With bombastic rhetoric, he concentrated on a few issues: leaving the Euro system, stopping immigration, and wariness about Muslims. He

transformed the party from a regional to a national force, dropping the name "Northern," and conducted an energetic campaign, even in southern Italy, the Mezzogiorno.

Interestingly, Salvini has cooperated with Russian President Putin's United Party, and opposed sanctions against Russia and Putin whom he admires, but he has also adopted a Trump like slogan "Italy first."

The 5 Star Movement led by 31 year old Luigi Di Maio, elected to parliament in 2013 where he became VP of the Chamber of Deputies, got 32% of the vote, getting strong support from discontented youth, and from the Mezzogiorno. Formed in 2009 by the popular comedian Beppe Grillo, the M5S is populist, it advocates a number of positions: anti-establishment, anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, and environmentalist. It calls for laws on various issues: allowing earlier retirement and making it more difficult for workers to be fired; a minimum monthly income; and direct democracy. It also calls for improved relations with Russia, and disapproves of Western, implicitly American, military intervention in the Middle East and Asia. Whatever the outcome of political bargaining, it will be a pillar in the next parliament.

The center left Democratic Party led by 42 year old Matteo Renzi, former prime minister and ex-mayor of Florence, and prime minister Paolo Gentiloni, declined. As a result Renzi has resigned leadership of the party.

At the extreme is the far right Brothers of Italy, led by 40 year-old Giorgia Meloni, hostile to EU economic and immigration policies. Less important but even more extreme are Forza Nuova which speaks of "Italy to the Italians," and CasaPound (taking its name from Ezra Pound) that admires Mussolini. It is disturbing that the small hometown of Mussolini, Redappio in northern Italy, with a stonemausoleum of the Il Duce and fascist memorabilia is visited by about 50,000 people a year, some of whom give the fascist salute and

praise him for protecting the "white race."

The necessary government coalition can take a number of possibilities, since there is no one majority party, and there is no clear outcome, but it is clear that support for traditional institutions and parties has been reduced with the rise and attractiveness of populist parties and the decline of the center left which is in retreat in Italy as in other European countries.

The rise of populism results from economic and political difficulties. Italy has been troubled by a number of problems: high rate of unemployment, nationally 11% and youth 34%; low economic growth, 1.5% compared with the EU average of 2.4%; lack of growth in productivity; high public sector debt; declining birthrates and a population that fell by 100,000; an aging population with 30% over 60; and above all the problem of immigration that brought more than 620,000 asylum seekers to Italy in the last four years.

For a time the view was prevalent that the development of history would lead to worldwide spread of liberal democracy and free market economies. That view is now challenged by the nationalist, populist wave sweeping Europe and now Italy, and by increasing lack of faith in existing institutions. There is no historical law leading to change in society and politics. The US administration must take account of the growing nationalism and racism now registered in European elections. The Italian election did not reflect the Neapolitan song; it was not *la bella cosa*, a beautiful thing in a sunny day.