

Italy Goes Back to Elections. Again

Dom Serafini (February 16, 2008)



This Time It's Serious. Convicts Need Not Apply

As The Gipper (late U.S. President Ronald Reagan's) used to say: "Here we go again!" And indeed, these upcoming elections will usher in Italy's 57th post-WWII government and the Country's 16th legislature. The fact that the resigning center-left government could have been in place for a full two years without having a clear majority in the Senate can be considered a miracle in and of itself. However, it's a miracle that cost Italians dearly in terms of higher taxes, increased crime, labor strikes, inflation and various emergencies, such as the one caused by uncollected garbage in Naples' environs.

The Minister of the Environment, Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio of the Green Party, would crusade against global warming but he didn't seem to know that garbage was piling up in his own backyard. But it wasn't just a case of government incompetence -- despite of the fact that it had the largest staff and a record number of deputy ministers -- the 15th legislature, meaning the Parliament itself (which is made of a Chamber of Deputies and a Senate) did not shine. As the TV images shown around the world attested, some members of the Senate -- who started spitting at each others, popping champagne corks and covering themselves with cold cuts, right in the high chamber, to celebrate the fall of Prime Minister Romano Prodi's Government -- clearly did not belong in that solemn place. Then there was the case of the Justice Minister, Clemente Mastella, who was investigated for corruption and his wife indicted. This is in addition to Deputy Finance Minister, Vincenzo Visco -- himself convicted for construction abuse -- who fired General Roberto Speciale reportedly because he sent his finance police to investigate corruption cases by politicians from the left, which belonged to the Government coalition.



The fact that, in the recent Italian Parliament there were some 20 members, or 2.2% of the whole legislative body, who were convicted of various crimes, indicated the state of affairs of modern Italy. And this is without considering the numerous members of Parliament who received some form of acquittal or had major brushes with the law.

Now, to begin understanding how the Italian political system functions, it is necessary to compare the following contrasting figures: Even though there have been 56 governments since 1948, the total number of prime ministers was only 25. This is because many of them were reappointed during the same legislature or subsequent legislature. If a legislature can complete its term (i.e., the government can keep its majority both in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate), it lasts five years. Considering that there have been 15 legislatures under the current Constitution, on the average, each legislature lasted a respectable four years and each one had on the average 3.7 governments and only 2.2 prime ministers.

So, the main problem with the Italian political system is not Parliament itself, but the executive branch, which keeps changing or reshuffling about once every year. Because of this constant state of instability, which, up to now has been the only stable element in the Italian political process, Italians are beginning to rely less on electoral promises and more on the “quality” level of Parliamentary candidates. For this purpose, spearheaded by -- of all people -- stand-up comedian, Beppe Grillo, and care-taker Minister of Infrastructures Antonio Di Pietro, several organizations have sprung up with the sole task of weeding out -- by exposing, denouncing and even campaigning against -- all candidates that have criminal pasts. The rationale behind this “cleansing” is that even though one cannot trust the political agenda, at least it can satisfy the moral, ethic and Italian need for “bella figura.”

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