

Senate. Who's the Winner in Wednesday Vote of Confidence? For the Moment, No One

Judith Harris (October 01, 2010)



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On the eve of the confidence vote in Parliament Wednesday a plainly tense and weary Premier Silvio Berlusconi lamented, "It's our duty to go on governing, even if it is neither easy nor simple. How many times one might be tempted to say—let's let others make that sacrifice."

But it didn't happen, and on this, the day after he received a successful vote of confidence of 342 votes, versus the 316 minimum necessary, the Premier went out of his way to show pleasure that the Chamber of Deputies had granted his government a solid majority. Today the vote was ratified in

the Senate, 174 to 129 votes. "The majority is stronger, and [Gianfranco] Fini's people turned out to be loyal," said Berlusconi with evident relief. "Now this government can complete the legislature."

Speaking on immigration today, Berlusconi pointed out that clandestine immigration "is down by 88%." And by December he promised that work will begin on the controversial project of building a bridge across the Straits of Messina.

So what kind of a victory was this for Berlusconi? Perhaps less than might seem. Few here therefore believe that early elections can be ruled out. Despite Berlusconi's winning the confidence vote with an ample majority, the decisive votes came from the now despised Fini group—the Futuristi, as they are being called—and from a group of Sicilian independents headed by the island's governor, Raffaele Lombardo, whose political career began with the Christian Democrats around Calogero Mannino. A sign of trouble: Berlusconi's one-time ally Gianfranco Fini has formally announced creation of his own political party, in a definitive separation from the formation he and Berlusconi had two had founded only two years ago, the Partito della Libertà.

Within the remnants of his party Berlusconi is relatively weakened for other reasons. "Berlusconi is the classic cat with nine lives, and in the past 16 years the post-Berlusconi era has been announced all too many times without its ever happening," says Marcello Sorgi, an authoritative commentator for *La Stampa* of Turin and its former deputy editor-in-chief. On the other hand, Sorgi goes on to say, Berlusconi is a tyrant—"a despot who tends to cut off not only dissent, but any and all debate within his party by use of threats, censures, and expulsions." For the Premier, therefore, "this victory was in fact a failure."

Until this week Umberto Bossi of the Northern League was the more aggressive of the ruling triad, and there is little reason to think that he will take a back seat now to the likes of Fini and Lombardi. A few days ago Bossi made a show-off statement declaring, "Sono porci questi romani," these Romans are pigs, a play on words on the ancient Roman SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus). The ensuing ruckus meant that Bossi risked parliamentary censure and was rapped on the knuckles by President Giorgio Napolitano. In a vaguely conciliatory mode Bossi more or less apologized. "If I offended the Romans, I beg our pardon....It was only a joke," he said. The censure motion was withdrawn.

It is less of a joke that Bossi also went on record saying Wednesday, "No one had better make a mistake now, or else we go to elections. Everyone understands that, even the Fini people...Certainly it is more probable in March, but for the moment we won't speak of March." Asked specifically if early elections are likely, he shook his head to indicate no—but then whispered exactly the opposite.

And meantime Bossi, with his son aka "La Trotta" (the Trout) in the wings, continues to wage war against Italy itself. Tensions within the coalition are therefore unlikely to decline; pro-Northern League authorities in a small school in Bossi turf in North Italy, at Adro, recently removed all national emblems, replaced with League symbols. When the school effectively disassociated itself from the Italian nation, a group of mothers signed a petition complaining at this act of disassociation from Italy.

So who's the winner in the vote of confidence? For the moment, no one.



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