

Renzi Opens to Movimento 5 Stelle

Judith Harris (December 14, 2013)



Matteo Renzi's trumpeted agenda for renewal of the Partito Democratico begins with reform of the despised "Porcellum," the "porker" or "pigsty" law, promoted by Silvio Berlusconi, which took effect in December of 2005. By its terms in a national general election the political party which bests the others, even when it has a mere 30% of the vote, walks away with 55% of the Senate and a large percent in the Chamber. Renzi is having none of this-- and is scaring the old pols witless because he seems willing to accept reform votes in Parliament from any quarter, not excluding the aggressive Beppe Grillo.



ROME - Those who voted last week in assemblies all over Italy for Matteo Renzi as general secretary of the Partito Democratico (PD) wanted a whirlwind of change, and they are already starting to get it. This is not the same thing as liking it, however. Renzi's trumpeted agenda begins with obtaining a new electoral law to replace the despised "Porcellum," as its many enemies call it. This "porker" or "pigsty" law, promoted by Silvio Berlusconi, took effect in December of 2005, and has had radical consequences on the Italian polity.

By its terms voters cannot choose their own candidates; that is the job of the party bosses in a smoke-filled room. Also, in a national election the political party which comes out ahead of the others, even when it has today's typically narrow margin of votes, perhaps as low as 30%, walks off with a comfortable majority in the Chamber of Deputies and 55% in the Senate, where the voting is already skewed by being calculated on the basis of the population of the various regions.

An obvious alternative to the Porcellum would be, French style, to have a run-off between the top two leading candidates--some suggest between the two leading coalitions--, but it is equally obvious that until now the parties lusting for power, which is what they do by definition, have chosen for the past eight years not to make changes because each has hoped it will be the one to walk off with the family jewels--that is, that majority freebie donation.

Renzi is having none of this - and is scaring the old pols witless. Why? Because he seems willing to accept votes on this in Parliament from any quarter, including from the aggressive forces of Silvio Berlusconi and of Beppe Grillo. The headlines tell the story: "Hoist on their own petards, panic on the left, in Parliament the Forza Italia-Cinque Stelle axis is born," trumpeted the right-wing daily *Il Giornale*. The moderate daily *La Stampa* of Turin acknowledges the new situation: "Palazzo Chigi [the Italian White House] is alarmed by Renzi's accelerating."

Alarm or not at Renzi's stepping on the gas, the feeling is that, unless a drastically reformed election law is passed by early January, the result may well be a government crisis that could open the floodgates to early elections even though Premier Letta's cabinet just won a vote of confidence on Dec. 11. Complicating the issue is that on Dec. 4 the Constitutional Court declared some of the main tenets of the Porcellum unconstitutional, particularly because it fails to allow voters to select individual candidates by name (*preferenze*). This gave renegade former comic Beppe Grillo and his Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) the opportunity to broadcast that a large number of parliamentarians are actually in office illegally.

Not that anyone paid much attention; Renzi's implicit opening to the M5S appears of greater concern to the opinion makers here than the court's decision. "The Movimento Cinque Stelle has already been let out of the box," warns Marcello Sorgi of *La Stampa* of Turin. "In a legislature whose future is uncertain, the balance of power is precarious and must of necessity be dealt with."

This flies in the face of the fact that Renzi--whose election as PD general secretary is expected to be ratified in an assembly in Milan on Sunday--had only recently agreed with President Giorgio Napolitano and Premier Enrico Letta to do his best to avoid early elections until 2015.

Showing he means business, Renzi has also been busy on another awkward front, calling for the elimination, not only the nationwide network of provincial governments, but also of the Senate itself, leaving Italy with a monocameral legislature. That surviving Chamber of Deputies too would be seriously reduced, if Renzi has his way.

Premier Letta, who is Renzi's political partner in the PD, plainly does not want Renzi stealing the show by coopting daily headlines and so trumped him by announcing Dec. 12 that political parties should no longer be publicly funded as of 2017. This had been one of Renzi's battle cries, but Letta's announcement beat him to the draw. It also caught the Grillo guerrilla fighters unprepared, who suggested lamely yesterday that, if the PD is against public funding, it can just return the funds to the sender.

In the background are loud and disturbing noises. Berlusconi, who must still carry out nine months of



social service or accept house arrest as part of his conviction for tax fraud, has announced that, if he is sent to jail (which is most unlikely), there will be "revolution" in Italy. In effect, there is a sort of revolution, but not Berlusconi's. Instead, in scattered piazzas and streets large numbers of Italians are demonstrating against the government--all governments--and tossing smoke bombs and breaking streetfront shop windows to show their wrath.

The unrest on the streets is building up, and risks turning seriously nasty. Police are occasionally baffled as to what to do. Taunted to stop hiding their faces behind helmets, a few policemen bared their faces, bringing down on their heads problems with their superiors. And when an attractive young female demonstrator kissed a policeman's helmet, she was charged with sexual violence.

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