Democracy Without Parties? Italy After Berlusconi

CHRIS J. BICKERTON AND CARLO INVERNIZZI ACCETTI

Italian political life may be no stranger to political instability but, even by its own tumultuous standards, recent events constitute history-making high drama. On 27 November 2013, the Italian Senate—not an institution known for its revolutionary instincts—voted to expel Silvio Berlusconi from its ranks. This decision comes on the back of a steady decline in support for il cavaliere from within his own political family. Earlier in the same month, when Berlusconi announced that Forza Italia would withdraw its support for the cross-party coalition government, a number of his most loyal allies rebelled. Angelino Alfano, currently Italy’s interior minister and long considered Berlusconi’s most likely successor to the leadership of the right, responded by quitting Forza Italia and setting up his own more moderate right-wing faction within the parliament.

Berlusconi’s expulsion from the Senate is more than just another episode in a career marked by both longevity and the constant whiff of scandal and controversy. Given Berlusconi’s two-decade dominance of Italian politics, his demise has significance across the whole political spectrum. The Italian right will struggle to contain further fragmentation. Already we see it divided between a rump still loyal to Berlusconi, the moderates like Alfano for whom the experience and privileges of governing have exerted a strong gravitational pull towards the centre, and the thoroughly disenchanted seeking refuge in the reassuring invective of Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement. Curiously enough, however, Berlusconi’s legacy is likely to be felt more on the left than on the right of the political spectrum. The left in Italy has long debated whether they need a ‘Berlusconi of the left’ and in Matteo Renzi, the young and media-savvy Mayor of Florence who won the leadership elections for the Democratic Party on 8 December 2013, they seem to have found the very person they have long fantasised about. The consequences of this for Italian politics are likely to be felt for many years to come.

The crisis of the Italian right

The depth of this crisis for the right stems from Berlusconi’s highly personalised style of rule. Rather than being associated with a set of principles, the right was remodelled around Berlusconi’s ebullient personality and clientelistic network. His persona was such a central part of his political appeal precisely because his entry into Italian politics corresponded with the collapse of the previous political order of the First Republic. The complex web of parties, ministries, parastatal enterprises and local political power-brokers, known pejoratively as partitocrazia (rule by the parties), had come under some strain before the outbreak of political corruption scandals in 1992, challenged from below by Umberto Bossi’s Northern League and from above by Italy’s entry into the European Monetary System and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. However, it was the corruption scandals that finally brought the old order down. And it was at this point that Berlusconi—with his money, showmanship and charisma—stepped into the vacuum. He soon found himself standing at the centre of a political landscape stripped of all its vegetation. Though ideologically on the right, Berlusconi was careful to disassociate himself from the past. He refused to rely on the extant structures of Christian Democracy to the point that Forza Italia meetings were never held in old Christian Democratic party buildings. In 1994, around 90 per cent of the new Forza Italia deputies had never before held any parliamentary seat. Out of power for the remainder of the 1990s, Berlusconi had time...
to build *Forza Italia* into something other than a mere fig-leaf for his electoral goals. But the individual was never subsumed by the party and Berlusconi pointedly refused to refer to his political organisations as parties, preferring instead more exhortative terms such as *Forza Italia and Popolo della Libertà*.

Resisting the idea that ‘Berlusconism’ emerged from a vacuum, some observers such as Perry Anderson have seen in him a continuation of the glitz and razzmatazz of the Socialist leader of the 1980s, Bettino Craxi. The two figures were certainly close: they holidayed together on the Ligurian coast and skied together in the French Alps; Craxi and his wife were witnesses at Berlusconi’s marriage to Veronica Lario in 1990. Yet the differences are stark. Craxi’s enjoyment of money and riches was an integral part of the boom years of the 1980s and in spite of them he remained very much a party man. His skill lay in his cultivation of political ties and his brokering of political alliances. His goal was to expand the authority of the Socialist party and his project remained a party political one. This was also the end to which he directed the clientelism and political corruption that finally forced him into exile: party financing, rather than self-enrichment, was the ultimate end of Craxi’s illicit financing model.

Berlusconi differs from Craxi in many ways. He gained his momentum from the collapse of the old order, the very order that Craxi had embodied so fully. The loyalty Berlusconi commanded was always to himself rather than to a political tradition. He pioneered, at least in Italy, a new form of political mobilisation that cut out the intermediary of the party: isolated individuals identifying themselves with political celebrities via the stories and footage of newspapers and television programmes. Berlusconi also differed from Craxi in his practice of political corruption. For Berlusconi, political corruption was merely a component part of his wider business empire; the empire was built for his personal enrichment, not for party financing, and it facilitated the latter only once Berlusconi had entered politics.

For all his energy and bluster, Berlusconi’s record of political and economic reform has been poor. Though most of his governing energies were dissipated in his incessant fight with the judges, another crucial reason for this ineffectiveness was an inability to convert his personal authority and charisma into a transformative political machine. The Italian right after Berlusconi thus finds itself shaped by this absence of any real legacy independent of the man himself. It is divided between the technocratic moderates of the Alfano faction and the populists of Grillo’s Five Star Movement, with a loyalist core stuck in the middle. This increasing polarisation between technocracy and populism follows logically from Berlusconi’s style of political rule. His managerialism—lifted straight from the corporate boardroom and parachuted into the gilded governance structures of the Italian political establishment—gave the Berlusconi years a curiously technocratic glaze. His populism—evident in his direct appeals to the Italian people, his larger-than-life personality, his personal memoirs published in lieu of a party manifesto—was proof of his own break with the ‘partitocracy’ of the First Republic.

The legacy of ‘Berlusconism’ for the Italian left

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Italian right is today struggling to adapt to life after Berlusconi. What is much more surprising is that his legacy is being felt most powerfully on the left. In a highly influential book published soon after the last electoral debacle, the Italian political scientist and spin doctor for the Democratic party, Mauro Calise, claimed that one of the reasons for this party’s historic weakness has been its reticence in adapting to the requirements of a media-dominated age, which for him inevitably implies accepting a measure of ‘personalization of leadership’.

Although Calise doesn’t go as far as to actually recommend Berlusconi as a ‘model’ for the Italian left, and is also careful to distinguish between the charismatic and clientelistic aspects of his leadership, this is the lesson many commentators have drawn, and it is in this form that the question has recently been hotly debated within the Democratic party itself.

Today, those who saw in this idea of a ‘Berlusconi of the left’ a viable strategy may be in the process of getting just what they wanted—in the guise of the young and entrepreneurial rising star of the Democratic party,
Matteo Renzi. During the previous electoral campaign (when his principal rival was the much more traditional party figure, Pier-Luigi Bersani), Berlusconi himself described any the prospect of Renzi taking up the leadership of the Democratic party as representing a ‘miracle’ and ironically added that if it were to happen he might consider voting for that party himself. The analogies between these two figures go further and extend into all aspects of ‘Berlusconism’.

Renzi has certainly learnt lessons from Berlusconi in matters of media management and self-promotion—not just because he is camera-friendly and knows how to speak in soundbites, but more importantly because he knows how and when to spark controversy. He first rose to national prominence when he made the claim that the Democratic party needed to ‘junk’ its political leadership. More than the claim itself, attention came because of the unconventional outlets chosen to deliver the message. These included the popular TV show Amici, aired on one of Berlusconi’s own channels, where Renzi appeared in a black bomber jacket giving high-fives to audience members and joking about his own resemblance to Fonzie from Happy Days.

To seasoned observers of contemporary media-dominated politics, this sort of self-promotion might not seem so striking. But in the Italian context, it stands out because of the left’s long-standing disdain for Berlusconi’s style of communication. Bersani embodied this perfectly, with his almost studiously un-telegenic appearances and his constant invocations of ‘sobriety’ and ‘common sense’. Renzi, in marked contrast, is the kind of politician who is always followed by paparazzi and will have himself filmed in real time while exercising his functions as Mayor of Florence.

Once asked in an accusatory tone by an old heavyweight of the left, Giuliano Amato, the title of the last book he had read—a question that solicited an awkward and vague response—Renzi has today transformed this celebrity-style anti-intellectualism into a badge of honour and supposed proof of his close connection with la gente (ordinary folk).

Indeed, in his transformation of politics into a media spectacle, Renzi has gone even further than Berlusconi himself. Whereas Berlusconi was spontaneous in his superficiality and vulgarity, Renzi’s image is carefully and explicitly managed. In a speech that launched his bid for the leadership of the Democratic party on 27 October 2013, Renzi began with a long recounting of the ‘psychodrama’ that had rested upon the choice of whether to speak from a podium or not. This decision was cast as one between presenting a ‘stately image’ and ‘connecting more directly with his audience’. What is happening here is not only that the medium becomes the message, as in Marshal McLuhan’s famous dictum, but the message itself also becomes more and more about the medium.

The focus on the personal qualities of the leader naturally follows from this style of political communication and much of the discussion of Renzi’s bid for the leadership of the Democratic party has revolved around him as a person: his age, his ambition, his personality, his clean image; all offset against Berlusconi’s litany of offences and peccadilloes. Such personalisation points towards a deeper element of commonality between them, which is their attack on the political party as a means of political mobilisation. Just like Berlusconi, Renzi’s leadership of his party is based on his personal charisma, which is used as a rallying point. This sits very uneasily with the Democratic party’s traditionally strong internal apparatus, which has been the source of most resistance to Renzi’s heady rise to prominence. The only real battle that took place in the run-up to the Democratic party primaries was over whether the right to participate in them ought to be restricted to registered party members or extended to the electorate at large. Renzi favoured the latter and it was by winning this battle that he secured the nomination, knowing that he could count on the support of many sympathisers outside the party and use that as a counterweight to opposition from within the party. This was reflected symbolically in his campaign: throughout, Renzi never appeared in public displaying or endorsing the Democratic party’s symbols. As he explained in speeches, his goal was to unite people around a common project more than it was to divide them along partisan or party lines.

In some ways, this strategy resembles that of France’s Ségolène Royal, who ran as presidential candidate in 2008 using her own...
political movement, *Desirs d’avenir*, to incarnate an image of youthfulness and independence from the crusty and clannish leadership of the French Parti Socialiste. However, Renzi’s own political project is far savvier than Royal’s and closer to Tony Blair’s transformation of the British Labour party from within. Instead of pitting himself against the party as an outsider, what Renzi has in mind when he talks about ‘junking’ it is to import a whole new model of political organisation, based on the creation of consensus around a single figure. In this model, the party is reduced to playing a role as a mere conduit and amplifier. This project is popular and plebiscitarian in its invocation of direct democracy (rule by the people rather than by parties), but it is most likely to end up simply bolstering the technocratic approach to exercising power.

It is here that we find another way in which Renzi is carrying forward and extending the legacy of Berlusconi. Both adhere to what Ilvo Diamanti has described as *l’ideologia del Fare* (‘the ideology of Doing’)6 and this ideology fuses together populist and technocratic aspects. On the populist side, there is the insistence that one’s record be judged in line with a set of personal engagements made directly with the people themselves. Berlusconi, for example, famously signed a ‘contract with the Italian people’ live on TV just before the 2001 national elections. Renzi has adopted this model and structured his own bid for the leadership of the Democratic party around four ‘simple proposals’: abolition of the upper house of parliament; simplification of the administrative structure of the state; reform of the electoral law on the model of city council elections; and reform of the justice system. These proposals are posited as an explicit contrast to the infamous 150-page government programme drafted by Prodi’s ill-fated coalition in the run-up to the 2006 election.

Quite apart from the fact that every one of these proposals was at one point or other endorsed, almost verbatim, by Berlusconi himself, taken together they reveal Renzi’s technocratic bent. They all betray a fundamental acquiescence to a set of goals assumed to have already been defined in advance, and thus no longer in need of public debate or justification. None of Renzi’s proposals, for instance, involves taking a principled stand on the central issues of political contention today: the economic crisis and the notion of ‘austerity’ are not even mentioned since Renzi has made clear that he would as leader uphold all of Italy’s existing commitments to the European Union. Instead, the common thread running through Renzi’s proposals is a concentration of power in the hands of the executive. This seems to be a logical corollary of the ‘ideology of Doing’ since, as Diamanti has insightfully suggested, if the defining feature of one’s political identity is that one is capable of ‘Doing’, it doesn’t matter what one does, only that one can do it. The political enemy therefore quickly becomes the party system itself and the administrative structure of the state, both of which are understood as needless fetters on the efficacy of executive action.

Even more fundamentally, however, what seems to underscore Renzi’s political project is a re-definition of the Democratic party’s social constituency. Heir to the mass-based Italian Communist party, the Democratic party had traditionally relied primarily on mobilisation of the working and lower-middle classes by means of a vast network of local and grassroots organisations. Renzi, however, has refused to target his campaign at this constituency, claiming that ‘workers’ have ceased to be a majority of the Italian electorate, and that in any case those who remain don’t primarily vote for the Democratic party anymore. Instead, he has claimed that a more up-to-date conception of the political left should stand for ‘change’ and ‘progressive reform’, from which for him it follows that its natural constituency is that of the ‘new generations’ seeking to replace the ‘old order’ with a more modern and youthful Italy. In this way, Renzi is attempting to substitute the old class-based cleavage that had traditionally underscored the left–right distinction in Italy with a new political division based essentially on the opposition between ‘youth’ and the ‘old guard’. At the same time, however, Renzi has also insisted that the notions of ‘youth’ and ‘generational change’ that he stands for should not be understood in any literal sense. For him, youth is first of all ‘a condition of the spirit’. Thus, by employing this category he is seeking to appeal to all those people who feel, or at
least want to think of themselves, as ‘young’—that is, as bearers of ‘newness’, ‘progress’ and ‘change’.

This involves a structural similarity with another key operation carried out by Berlusconi, and which underscored much of his success. The central figure around which Berlusconi had organised most of his campaigning was that of the entrepreneur as a self-made man. Once again, however, Berlusconi was keen to make clear that entrepreneurship was not to be understood in a strict sense. Everybody, he claimed, is potentially an entrepreneur, to the extent that they are ambitious and understand their economic choices as strategic decisions in a long-standing project of self-aggrandisement. In this way, Berlusconi was able to appeal to the relatively large class of people in contemporary Italy who think of themselves as self-reliant and upwardly mobile, whether or not this bears any objective relationship to their material conditions. For instance, it has often been pointed out that many of the workers employed in the vast web of small and medium enterprises that constitute the driving force of Italy’s economy perceive their own fortunes as closely tied to that of the businesses they work for. As a consequence, they often tend to identify their interests with those of the entrepreneurial class rather than those of workers, even though from a material point of view they objectively belong to the latter. 7

Indeed, it is precisely this expanding but also highly volatile electorate that Renzi seems intent on stealing from Berlusconi, through the appeal to the category of ‘youth’ as a vector of political mobilisation. Thus, even sociologically, the underpinnings of Renzi’s political project are not that far removed from Berlusconi’s. Of course, the success of this project will depend upon Renzi’s capacity to retain the support of the Democratic party’s traditional constituencies, preventing the formation of a significant political alternative to the left of the Democratic party. For the time being, this is only a possibility that has been vaunted rather abstractly by the disgruntled members of the party’s apparatus. It remains to be seen whether anything will come of it.

The political terrain in Italy after the demise of Berlusconi therefore appears to have set the stage for a number of surprises. On the right, for all of his double-decade dominance, Berlusconi is not likely to leave much of a political legacy. He was propelled into politics by the collapse of the old First Republic political guard and his own power rested upon his charisma and his refashioning of politics along the lines of what Bernard Manin has called ‘audience democracy’: the endorsement through plebiscites of celebrity-style leaders, with the public reduced to the status of onlookers or sympathisers. This way of doing politics gives prominence to individuals over party organisations and makes any political family vulnerable to the passing of its leader, as we see with the Italian right today. And yet, if Berlusconi presided as prosecutor in the case against the Italian version of ‘party government’, we find that its most willing executioner lies on the left, in the figure of Matteo Renzi. Long resistant to Berlusconi’s mediation and personalisation of politics, the Italian left has today given up the fight. Renzi is going further than Berlusconi ever did in emptying politics of its reliance upon party organisations and pushing it down the twin routes of technocratic administration and populist political rhetoric. Interviewed recently in Vanity Fair, Renzi announced that after a career in politics, he would like to try his luck at television—a trajectory that is the exact inversion of Berlusconi’s. Berlusconi was perhaps the prime beneficiary of the political revolution that shook Italy from 1992 to 1994. But ‘Berlusconism’ after Berlusconi will be felt above all on the left of Italian politics, and Matteo Renzi—young, voluble, ruthlessly pragmatic in his treatment of his own political family—seems set to finally bury Italian ‘party government’ and all its associated traditions and ideals.

Notes
3 On this point see for example the forum launched by la Repubblica on its Facebook page precisely on the question of whether what the left needs to win is ‘a left-wing Berlusconi’, which includes contributions by noted Italian opinion-makers such as Ilvo Diamanti and Giancarlo Bosetti.