

## Misery and the Elections in the Final Stretch

Judith Harris (February 03, 2013)



As Leonardo Sciascia once said, it is easy to manage wealth, but hard to manage misery. These are tough times for Italy as elsewhere, and the sight of shops shutting down and factory closures is the elephant in the room of the national general elections just three weeks away. All this is serious enough, but is further aggravated by the daily revelations of the financial shenanigans at the world's oldest bank, the Monte di Paschi (MPS) of Siena, where huge losses were craftily concealed while managers are under investigation for allegedly enriching themselves (the scandals refer to the previous, not the present management, in office just one year).

ROME - The national elections loom all the more important and obviously nerve-wracking because they are flanked by regional elections to take place at the same time in Italy's financial capital Lombardy and its administrative capital Rome. Under the circumstances, it is disappointing that, in this final stretch of one of the most bizarre election campaigns in Italian postwar history, the non-

stop TV talk show appearances are salted with personalized insults, but little of substance.

Here's this week's synthesis, admittedly simplistic. Pier Luigi Bersani said the other day that anyone attacking his Partito Democratico (PD) would be "torn to shreds" (sbranato) and that the party winning the most votes has the right to hold the premiership--i.e., Bersani does. "We have a great project!" he exclaimed in a TV appearance, building castles in the air and wearing just-folks shirt sleeves. In that other populist campaign on the right, backed by the Northern League, former Premier Silvio Berlusconi says that Italy's problems will be resolved by its quitting the Euro. Like it or not, Berlusconi has now risen to within five or so percentage points of the PD's estimated 30%.

Mario Monti, speaking for the centrists (and polls currently give his list around 15%), tried to attack the PD politely by remarking that it was "founded in 1921." He'd meant the Italian Communist party, in an attempt to suggest that the current aging PD with its strong trade union ties had exceeded its shelf life. But at this the youthful Matteo Renzi of the PD retorted that Monti was confusing the rival party with the year of his own birth.

Monti can say what he pleases, however, for he is currently like a prom queen being courted by both Berlusconi and the non-Berlusconi conservative right, for Monti's declaring this week that the centerpiece of his "Agenda" will be fiscal reform. At the same time, speaking for the PD, its second-in-command Enrico Letta is now also openly courting Monti.

But the spoilers camp on the left also warrants attention. From his camper on his "tsunami tour," Beppe Grillo continues to vilify everyone and everything while collecting votes and applause. His rival leftist candidate Antonio Ingroia, whom polls show is backed by one out of 20 voters, outraged fellow magistrates of high rank and reputation by unwittingly - and witlessly - seeming to compare himself with martyred Sicilian judge Giovanni Falcone.

As insults and invective fly, the problems remain on the table, probably because they are so great that no serious solution is a viable election platform, and the politicians shy away from tackling them. As countless observers here, right and left, point out, one of the worst is youth unemployment, standing now at 36.6% for those between 15 and 24 years of age. Although a hair above last month's figure, this is the highest in two decades, and many here believe that these young people without prospects - today, some 600,000 - will make up the bulk of the 40% of alienated voters who will stay at home or turn in blank ballots if they bother to leave their parents' house. They are what author Beppe Severgnini calls "the transparent generation" because political Italy has grown accustomed to screening them from their vision.

A factor in the desperation of young people seeking but not finding work is the lower quality of education, in large part due to scant funding. Even school buildings left without maintenance are placing some children at risk. Of public spending, education accounts for at most 4.9% of GDP today, leaving Italy 31st down of 32 nations studied, well below the median of West Europe, 6.2%. According to an OCSE report of September 2012, while infant school teachers are fairly well paid, salaries of university instructors are well below the median. The top earners are high school teachers, who take home a relatively modest \$36,600 a year.

At the Small Industry Forum in Prato last October, a study of Italy's total government expenditures and its fiscal pressure showed that both spending and taxes are notably higher than Germany's. The conclusion: Italians face a double waste: those who pay taxes overpay and in return "receive [public] services at an excessive price and of poor quality."



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[1] <http://newsite.italy.org/files/35304berani1359869236jpg>