

"Showman" Renzi Delivers the Election Law

Judith Harris (March 13, 2014)



It's a done deal: on Wednesday the Chamber of Deputies passed a revised election law dubbed the "Italicum," with 365 votes in favor, 156 nays and 40 abstentions. The new law, whose aim is to promote governing stability in a country where the political parties are locked in a three-way split, now passes to the Senate for debate and approval. But Premier Matteo Renzi's point was also to show that he can make good on his promises to bring change.

ROME - It's a done deal: on Wednesday the Chamber of Deputies passed a revised election law dubbed the "Italicum," with 365 votes in favor, 156 nays and 40 abstentions. The bill, which now goes before the Senate for debate and approval, is valid solely for the lower house because the question of election reform has been split off from a proposed abolition (or at least radical reform) of the Senate, which includes a provision that, if it exists at all, it would no longer have elected representatives.

The goal of the new law is to promote governing stability in a country where the political parties are locked in a three-way split. But Premier Matteo Renzi's point was also to show that he can make



good on his promises to bring change. Immediately following the vote, he triumphantly tweeted, "Thanks to the women and men deputies. They have shown that we can really change Italy. Politics 1, Defeatism 0. This is change for the good."

Among the surprise abstentions Wednesday was Scelta Civica, the party created by former Premier Mario Monti until he resigned from it last October. "The Italicum jumps onto novelties but an election law must have transparency, and this reform is not going in the right direction," said a Scelta Civica statement. "We hope to encourage renegotiation and an improved reform bill in the Senate."

Curiously, a last-minute addition to the bill, backed by women and a few men from both government and opposition parties, had taken center-stage in heated debates during the past week. It had called for Parliament to have men and women members alternating on the election lists, but failed to pass despite winning the support of 90 MPs. To show that support, instead of waving placards and jumping from bench to bench (and we have seen too much of this already), all wore white to Parliamentary sessions. Less dignified was the reaction of the opposition party headed by Beppe Grillo, Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), whose raucous deputies held up posters of protest against the Italicum. On his blog Grillo ran a photo of Renzi as Mussolini over the text: "We're in store for a new Fascist era...a democratic dictatorship inspired by Gelli." Licio Gelli was the leader of the renegade, secret P2 Masonic lodge, and Grillo's attacks on Masonry are frequent.

The revised election law was passed (with the provisions predicted here last week) thanks to the backing of former Premier Silvio Berlusconi, 77. Had it failed, the Renzi government itself would have been at risk, and so this crucial role made Berlusconi once again a player despite his conviction for tax fraud in August followed by expulsion from the Senate in November of 2013. Not surprisingly, Berlusconi, leader of the center-right, goes to some lengths to praise young Renzi, 39, leader of the left-leaning Partito Democratico (PD). Renzi, said Berlusconi, is "bravissimo," "trustworthy," and "got rid of more Communists in two months than I managed to be rid of in 20 years." Perhaps as a result, some here are whispering that the deal worked out in a strictly private meeting between Berlusconi and Renzi in February was not limited solely to the election law--and this helps to explain why in Berlusconi's Forza Italia party that enthusiasm is less than contagious--on the contrary. The same signs of hostility toward what some see as connivance are evident in Renzi's PD.

But all that was yesterday's news. On Wednesday Premier Renzi also gave a press conference outlining his plan to cut taxes so as to revive the economy. As the journalists present pointed out, as soon as the economics specialists challenged a specific point, Renzi backed away, gazing instead into the TV cameras, his real audience. "He's a snake charmer," one sighed. "Albeit a good one." Among the economic measures under consideration for quick action are tax cuts for low income families, whose aim is "by April 27 to put 100 euros more into every pay packet", said Renzi. Asked where the money to fund his proposals would be found, Renzi responded that income from financial sources would be taxed at a higher rate. "Renzi has style," commented Stefano Folli, expert with the financial daily *Il sole-24 Ore*. "He's a showman, and he proposes novelties. But it's still a program, and no specific measures have been put into effect."

Renzi also plans for the sum employers put into employees' paychecks for social services (IRAP) to be cut by 10%, a move that won kudos from big and small businesses. Even the usually truculent Susanna Camusso, head of the leftist trade union CGIL, admitted that she was not dissatisfied with the entire economic program even though Renzi did not bother to consult the unions. "There is a tax restitution to dependent workers, and this is a positive thing," she said. At the same time Camusso called for a reduction in taxes for low-income pensioners.



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