

“Kangaroo” Has Senate Hopping

Judith Harris (July 31, 2014)



A crucial vote on Senate reform—already passed in the Chamber of Deputies—may take place by mid-August. The goal of the reform bill, a hallmark of Premier Matteo Renzi’s government, is to make the Senate more distinct from Parliament in hopes of speeding up the legislative process. Ratification had been bogged down by introduction of 7,800 amendments until Wednesday, when a “kangaroo” hopped into the Senate to help save the day.

ROME – A final vote on the pressing reform of the Senate, one of the hallmarks of Premier Matteo Renzi’s government, may take place by mid-August. The goal is to make the Senate more distinct



than the Chamber of Deputies in hopes of speeding up the legislative process, but ratification of the bill—already passed in the Chamber—has been bogged down by introduction of 7,800 amendments. Happily for Renzi, a “kangaroo”—the political nickname given here to a leap over amendments so as to speed up the process—hopped into the Senate to help save the day.

It is still hardly smooth sailing. From the Renzi crowd came shocked gasps when, in a secret ballot Thursday which the PD had unsuccessfully opposed, a Northern League amendment was passed, allowing the Senate to legislate over a number of controversial ethical issues—the family, marriage, health, biotestament, civil rights. Obviously some of Renzi's senators voted for it and against their party. Grillo's senators exulted, as did Vendola.

Renzi's opponents had argued that bundling together similar amendments was unconstitutional and authoritarian, but this week's study of precedents indicated its legality and paved the way for the “kangaroo.” Applied Wednesday, it slashed the number of amendments by 2,000 in one fell sweep. For instance, where a series of amendments progressively reduced the number of Senators from 630 down to a few hundred, by fifty at a time, the dozen or so similar amendments became just two.

To make its point that many of the amendments on the Senate vote are foolish as well as useless, the PD issued a list of their “ten most absurd.” Here are some from that list:

1. “Suppress articles 1-20; Suppress articles 1-19; Suppress articles 1-18; Suppress articles 1-17.”
2. “Substitute, wherever they are found, the words ‘Chamber of Deputies’ with the words ‘National Diet.’”
3. Add to the Constitution: “Italian citizenship is acquired by descendance from Italian parents.”
4. “...not inferior to 79 years; not inferior to 78 years...” and so on down to “not inferior to 60 years.”
5. “Each region shall have its symbols of flag and hymn.”
6. “The effects of tax dispositions cannot be retroactive.”
7. “Substitute wherever it occurs the word ‘deputy’ with ‘Communes.’”

If Senate reform succeeds, it will be the Renzi government's first major triumph, expected to demonstrate to a skeptical Europe that reform in Italy is possible. Most importantly, it brings the second fundamental reform on Renzi's agenda—revision of today's blatantly unfair electoral process—a shade closer. With luck, PD insiders predict, that vote will take place in September.

Until now the voting process has been painful. To attempt to deal with the hailstorm of amendments, the Senate is meeting daily from 9 am through midnight daily, including weekends. Needless to say, Beppe Grillo and his Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) have insisted upon discussion of each and every one. So does Nichi Vendola, head of the left-leaning Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (SEL); this a one-time Renzi ally is responsible for literally thousands of the proposed amendments.

Tempers ran short, and when a shouting match had PD senators and their Grillo opponents close to blows, Senate officials and fellow party members separated them. As an outraged Maria Elena Boschi, 33-year-old lawyer and Renzi's Minister for Reforms, said, “Italians deserve better than to have to watch scenes like this in the Senate or Parliament. This obstructionism is blackmail, and we are not about to give in.”

At that point a mediator proposed postponing the final vote on the reforms until September in exchange for the opposition's trimming the deluge of amendments. An accommodating Renzi agreed, saying that it matters little if his reforms pass in August or even October: “It's not a medal I'm going to wear on my chest,” he said. Still, he added ominously, “We go forward, whatever the cost.”

Among the reasons for the PD rift with Vendola's SEL is the fact that Renzi's partner in the reform of the voting process is former Premier Silvio Berlusconi (absent from Rome after falling ill from a virus and taking a tumble in the bathroom in Milan), who continues to support the plan he and Renzi worked out together in February. Since then some modification of that bill has been made by the PD's Anna Finocchiaro working together with Senator Roberto Calderoli, former national secretary of



the Northern League and the author of the controversial, so-called “Porcellum” election law, which the new law, the “Italicum,” would replace.

Major sticking points are gender parity for those elected (i.e., half guys, half gals); the number of extra members of Parliament the leading party would obtain as freebies; and, after introduction of a run-off ballot, the necessary numbers for a winning percentage. Not least is the minimum percentage of the vote which small parties, or their coalitions, must win before obtaining a member of Parliament. Needless to say, this percentage is bitterly fought over by the smaller parties (which include Vendola’s SEL) and by subtle arguments over mergers with a larger party.

Professor Roberto D’Alimonte of the LUISS institute for governing in Rome is an acknowledged authority on electoral processes. After graduate studies in Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley, he taught for over 30 years at the University of Florence. In his opinion, “The ‘Italicum’ could stand improvement, but if I were in Parliament I would vote for it because I prefer an imperfect reform to no reform.” D’Alimonte says he has reservations about the hotly debated re-introduction of nominal preferences. “In the First Republic this caused a lot of damage, and today in Lombardy preferences are hardly used at all, whereas 90% of the people in the Campania, Calabria, Puglia and so on do use them. One must ask just why this should be.”

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