

For Renzi, an Historic Victory

Judith Harris (May 26, 2014)



Most of the pundits and pollsters got it wrong - seriously wrong. Not one had hazarded that Premier Matteo Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD) would walk away with almost 42% of the vote for a new European Parliament, and - even more startling - that his blustering arch-rival Beppe Grillo of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) would manage to lose some 2.5 million voters, claiming at best 21.6% of the electorate. (The figures are not definitive because they do not include the overseas vote and some outlying Italian districts.)

ROME - For Renzi, it was literally an historic victory - "a plebescite," it is being called here, unmatched since the Christian Democratic triumphs of the Fifties. The turnout, predicted to be extremely low, was instead larger than elsewhere in Europe, with various percentages still bruited



about, ranging up to 59% vis a' vis the European average of only 43%.

Said one professorial observer today: "It was the fear factor. Grillo scared the moderates." Indeed, in these early hours while final votes are still being counted, commentators remarked that the conservatives were so terrified by the Grillo factor that for the first time they voted to the left, and in the little village in North Lazio where I live, a man took his 93-year-old mother to the polling station "just because she had to vote against Grillo."

To these conservatives, Renzi appears a force for moderation, to wit., his antagonistic relationship with the Big Three trade unions, beginning with open hostility to him from Susanna Camussa, head of the farthest left CGIL. As a result, the traditionally conservative country now finds in Renzi's PD an echo of the old Christian Democratic party, whose factions ranged from arch-conservatives to leftist Catholic activists. Grillo also lost the leftist vote, however, even though in the final, frantic days of what was one of the most dismal election campaigns ever, he came out with fulsome praise for the late Communist party leader Enrico Berlinguer. It did not work, and Grillo's old hashtag #Vinciamo Noi was just converted by sarcastic opponents into #VinciamoPoi (We win now to We win later). Maybe so, but he had actually threatened to quit politics if his movement did not go forward. His internet guru Gianroberto Casaleggi had also said, "Now or never." (Don't believe it.)

If the duel in Italy's OK Coral was essentially between Renzi and Grillo, Silvio Berlusconi made a, for him, disappointing showdown showing, walking away with only 16.3% of the vote, by comparison with his movement's 21.6% of national general elections in 2013. In those of 2009 he had claimed 35.2%. Nevertheless, early opinion here is that his losses are shattering but not definitive, and he is not out of the picture, and his daughter Marina is waiting in the wings.

Two novelties: the first is that numerous left-leaning but moderate Italian intellectualsturned out to back a new Greece-inspired movement called L'Alternativa con Tsipras, which won over 4% of the vote and has become a player, in an interesting development. The second is the complete disappearance from the scene of Antonio Di Pietra's Italia dei Valori.

Looking ahead, the financial daily Il Sole'24 Ore commented that the vote marked the end of a period of shouts and promises, and that it is to be hoped that this election will be the first step "on the path to growth and change" -- that growth and change all the politicians have been talking about without taking action.

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