THE INSTITUTIONAL ODYSSEY OF THE ITALIAN PARLIAMENTARY REPUBLIC

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Introduction

The subject of my presentation is the Italian parliamentary republic in the period between 1948 and 2011. After the Second World War, republican Italy re-introduced the parliamentary model of government in clear continuity with the parliamentary experience of liberal Italy interrupted by the fascist regime in mid-1920s (Cassese 2010). After all, none of the reconstructed democracies of the European nation states, even those defeated in the Second World War, adopted (or were pressured to adopt) the model of separation of powers of the United States: a fact that certainly highlights the liberal attitude of the winner (on the democratic side) of that war (von Beyme 1987). Thus, republican Italy built a system of fusion of powers where the government is formed within the parliament through a majority that expresses (and supports) its executive. In fusion of powers’ system, government and executive are synonymous. The government has the power of the last decision, insofar it is supported by the legislature. Here, the check on the government comes (or should come) from the parliamentary minority, or better from the opposition. Radically different is the institutional system of the US model of separation of powers.

In the United States there is no a government as ultimate decision-maker, but separated institutions sharing governmental power (Neustadt 1990). In the United States, government and executive do not coincide (Rockman 1984): the latter is constituted by the President, the former by all the separated institutions. Moreover, notwithstanding the constitutional recognition of regional government, republican Italy has maintained a unitary nature regarding the organization of territorial powers. And, of course, the constitutional court’s role was defined in accordance with the Kelsen’s theory that only an ad hoc and quasi-judiciary organ has the power to control the constitutionality of the legislature’s output, not according to the Madison’s theory of judicial review. Thus, republican Italy has returned to the family of European parliamentary systems, all of them significantly different from the US model of separated government (Fabbrini 2008).

My aim is to reconstruct how the Italian parliamentary republic has changed over the decades, since its inception with the constitution of 1948. The argument is that its governmental system, since the 1990s, has changed dramatically but not coherently: the parliament is no longer the centre of political power as it was in the first four decades, but the increasingly central role of the government has not yet found a new stable institutional framework. In Italy thus, like in most Western parliamentary democracies (Helms 2005), the government has taken on a central role in the political process. The reasons for this change are structural and not contingent. They are the result of both international and domestic changes. This set of processes has boosted the executive’s
decision-making role, while the importance of the legislative branch has concomitantly declined. This shift in the balance of power between the executive and the legislative institutions, however, has not been accompanied or regulated by a proper constitutional reform, due to institutional resistance as well as the cultural inadequacy of the country’s political elite. Hence, the *unbalanced democracy* that is now characteristic of Italy. One might reasonably argue that the institutional odyssey of republican Italy is far from having reached a safe harbour.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, I will discuss the characteristics of the Italian parliamentary government. Secondly, I will tackle the international and domestic reasons behind the rise of government and decline of parliament. Thirdly, I will discuss the reasons for the ascending influence of the Italian heads of government. Fourthly, on the basis of these reasons, I will explain how this rise of government and decline of parliament has determined a number of political and institutional problems. My conclusion is that, in Italy, a proper balance between the *strength of and checks on* governmental power has not yet achieved.

**The consensual period**

During the Cold War period (1948-1991), Italy was a border country in the confrontation between the west and the east, thus crystallised a party system that mirrored the division between the two major world powers. Republican Italy has come to be structured around multiple cleavages, but mainly around the ideological one which opposed Communist and anti-Communist forces. Given the constitutional legitimacy of the Communist Party (or PCI) but its democratic deficit, it was inevitable to wrap the political process within consensual clothes. With the repeal of the highly majoritarian electoral system (defined by its adversaries as “*legge truffa*”) after the parliamentary elections of 1953, republican Italy returned to the highly proportional electoral system already adopted in the parliamentary elections of 1948. The implication was the development of a practice of governing through large coalitions organized around the main centrist party, the Christian Democracy (or DC). However, because the electoral strength of the PCI was growing election after election, the governing coalition pursued a politics of inclusion of the Communists in the legislative process, thus making the parliament the real centre of political power (Manzella 1977; Di Palma 1977). After all, the Communists could not be consociated in the government, given their organic relation with the geo-military alliance (the Warsaw Pact) opposed to NATO, to which Italy belonged. This structuring of the political system around the central role of the legislature distinguished Italy from the other European consensual democracies (such as the Netherlands, Belgium or Austria). In fact, in the latter, the consensual logic took place within the government,
whereas in Italy that logic was implemented also or mainly in the parliament (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007).

It is understandable why, during the Cold War period, Italian governments were generally weak and unstable, although they were the expression of strong and stable parties. Parties mattered more than the institutions, also because it was the anti-fascist parties that built the new democratic institutions. The distinction between parties and institutions came to be structurally opaque, exactly because the institutions had to serve the parties’ purpose of taming their radical differences. Republican Italy inevitably degenerated in a partitocracy, although the latter showed to be highly efficient in preventing the political war between the two ideological camps to explode at the mass level. The Italian was a consensus democracy because there could be no competition between Communists and anti-Communists for the control of the governments. As Sartori explained in 1982, the former represented an anti-systemic, although not an anti-constitutional, force.

Throughout this period, the government, as an institution, had a limited role to play. The key policy decisions for the country were charted out and approved by and in the parliament, where collaboration between the majority and opposition parties could develop without jeopardising the stability of the geopolitical alliances of which Italy was a member (from NATO to the European Community). The so-called conventio ad excludendum (a formula enunciated by Elia, in 1970, defining the agreement to keep the Communist Party out of government but within the legislative process taking place in the parliament, also because it accounted for nearly 1/3 of the electorate that could not be disregarded) was, therefore, primarily justified by foreign policy concerns. Such concern was absent in the other European consensual democracies (as Belgium, Netherlands or Austria), where the cleavages had a cultural, linguistic or ethnic nature. Republican Italy was not only the case, of course, of a consensualism imposed by ideological reasons, if one think to France of the Fourth Republic (1946-1958) or to Finland. However, the Italian case was the more persistent.

**The change of the international system**

The change in international politics inevitably unfroze the institutional balance of Italy’s consensus democracy (Fabbrini and Della Sala 2004). The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, radically challenged the party structure built up during the Cold War period. The parties that had governed Italy until then collapsed entirely, with regard to both their organisation and their identity, in the wake of a series of criminal inquiries launched by the prosecution authorities and aimed at investigating and countering the degeneration
of the party system. No other Western democracy has ever witnessed a collapse of the party system on quite this scale. Even the parties previously viewed as anti-system underwent a profound identity crisis, which ultimately led to a radical redefinition of their organization and even denomination. The ideological divide that congealed the party system between the 1950s and the 1980s had lost its structural justification, although not its electoral appeal.

So, in the 1990s, Italian democracy changed its manner of functioning, moving from consensus to competition. Generally speaking, a competitive democracy is a system based on the expectation of regular alternation in government between parties, or coalitions of parties, with opposing views, but all of which are legitimated to govern (based on international and domestic criteria). The introduction of a quasi-majoritarian voting system in 1993 (on the basis of which ¾ of the parliamentary seats had to be contested in uninominal-plurality districts and ¼ had to be distributed through a proportional representation formula based on party lists) fostered the transition from a consensus to a competitive political system. The majoritarian logic of the ¾ uninominal districts created powerful incentives for bipolarizing the competition in each of them.

However, the majoritarian effects of the 1993 electoral reform proved rather shaky, not only for its contradictory logic (majoritarian but also proportional) but mainly because it was not accompanied – or indeed followed – by a coherent redefinition of the broader institutional system. The fact remains, however, that the end of the Cold War witnessed the disintegration of the old party system and the emergence of a new – and highly conflictual – bipolar political logic. Since then, the true stake of the electoral competition between the two major coalitions (centre-right and centre-left) has been the conquering of the government. In this competitive environment, and with weak party organizations, the personal characteristics of the candidate running as leader of the coalition have inevitably made the difference, as regards the outcome of the election. In Italy, more than in other European democracies, it has been the leader of the coalition who drives or hinders the success of the coalition, not vice versa.

While in the generality of established democracies (with the exception of the smallest), there has been a trend towards enhanced decision-making capacity by governments throughout the second half of the past century, in Italy this process has developed fully only at the close of the

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1 I prefer to use (Fabbrini 2008) the concept of competitive rather than majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 1999), in order to emphasize how it operates (the alternation in government of different policy options), rather than the voting system (the majoritarian system) used to achieve this alternation. There are, in fact, competitive democracies in countries that have adopted non-majoritarian electoral systems (such as Spain, Greece and even Germany). Aside from the electoral system, the party system dynamics must also be taken into account, examining how the two systems (electoral and party) interact.
The weakness of governments in the Italian consensual democracy was an exception among the larger European democracies. No medium-large country could afford to have a weak and unstable government. In Italy, this was possible also because the country did not play a significant international role. Certainly, some Italian governments, or individual governmental leaders, were able to take crucial decisions in specific historical periods (for anchoring the country to the western alliance, for making the country one of the founder of the European integrated community, for opening up the market, for promoting the economic miracle, for modernizing the society and the state), however the government as such continued to be a weak institution, with governmental crises which followed one to the other on average every 11 months. By the way, this condition of weak governments ended up damaging certain areas of southern Italy, traditionally poor in terms of social capital, while favouring an opposite outcome in the centre-north of the country, thus widening the gap between the two areas of the country (Sabetti 2000; Putnam 1993).

In sum, Italy during the Cold War was a country subject to limited sovereignty, a country that entrusted to others the task of ensuring its security and protecting its international interests (Panebianco 1997). This has justified the lack of decision-making capacity by its parliamentary system. On the contrary, the lack of decision-making capacity by the French consensual parliament of the Fourth Republic brought the elites of that country, in the dramatic events which followed the decolonization’s process in the second half of the 1950s, to introduce (or to accept the introduction of) sweeping constitutional reforms (leading thus to the creation of the Fifth Republic). It cannot surprise, therefore, that the combination of international changes and parties’ collapse helped to ferry post-Cold War Italy into the family of government-centred democracies.

The rise of the executive branch

The executive started increasing its influence in the decision-making process already in the 1980s (Barbieri and Verzichelli 2003). However, it was the establishment of a competitive bipolar political structure, from the general election of 1996 (when the party system reorganised itself along decidedly bipolar lines), that consolidated this ascent. After the electoral reform of 1993, governments have been formed directly on the basis of the outcome of bipolar electoral competitions. It is the voters now who choose the government, no longer the members of the legislative branch. Since the 1990s, the answer to the question posed by Sabino Cassesse in 1980 – is there a government in Italy? – would undoubtedly be an affirmative one. Not only has the executive strengthened itself vis-à-vis the legislative branches, but the presidency of the council of ministers has also asserted itself vis-à-vis the other governmental departments making up the
executive. One could say that the president of the council of ministers has been transformed, through significant organizational reform of his office, into a prime minister, although this trend has been more visible under the centre-right governments than under the centre-left ones.

In fact, due to specific personal characteristics, but also by virtue of a different political culture, the leadership role of the head of government has been recognised as a ‘value’ by the centre-right coalition, while being viewed as a ‘disvalue’ by the centre-left coalition. Of course, even in the centre-right, the leadership has been contested or in any case (at times even hotly) debated. Suffice it to mention the highly personalised conflict between the head of the government Silvio Berlusconi, and the speaker of the chamber of deputies Gianfranco Fini, the outcome of which, in 2010, was the latter’s expulsion from the party he had co-founded, the People of Freedom party, or PDL (*Popolo della libertà*). Or the rivalry between Silvio Berlusconi and the minister of economy Giulio Tremonti all along the budgetary crisis of 2011. The fact remains, however, that during the centre-right governments (2001-2006 and after 2008), the prominent role of the head of government has been generally recognized by the other ministers, while the same cannot be said during the centre-left governments (1996-2001 and 2006-2008). This is clearly testified by the fall of the Prodi government in 2008, just two years after having been sworn into office, but also by the repeated reshufflings of both ministers and heads of government during the centre-left majority of 1996-2001. During that period, in fact, three heads of government succeeded each other – Romano Prodi, Massimo D’Alema and Giuliano Amato – with corresponding (partial) changes in the centre-left majority in parliament.

There has clearly been a shift, since the early 1990s, from a parliament-centred to a government-centred system, which process has led to a replacement of the leaderless governments of the past to governments with a clear political leadership. However, the primacy of the head of government has not been codified by new norms, nor the parliament has reformed its symmetrical bicameralism. Thus, although the parliament has abandoned its previous power-sharing role, nevertheless it has not become the key forum for confrontation between the government and the opposition (as it should be in competitive democracies). In a competitive democracy, in fact, only the popular chamber has the power to ‘form’ the government, that is to give or refuse the confidence’s vote to the latter. In Italy, on the contrary, the two chambers of the parliament have retained the same power in the formation of the government. Certainly, the post-1994 decision to elect members of the majority to the office of speaker of both chambers can be considered as the epitome of the post-consensual transformation of the parliament (Lupo 2011). Being chosen by the voters, the parties in the government inevitably have acted to secure the institutional conditions for
passing the legislation promised to the voters. However, the parliament has resisted any structural reform. The persistence of a symmetrical bicameralism and the spurious nature of the governmental coalitions have continued to generate formidable incentives for preventing a clear distinction between the majority and the minority.

**The rise of the Prince**

The leaderless governments of the Cold War period were the expression of a specific party system and of its operational logic. Coalition governments between strong and mutually suspicious parties had necessarily a negative feature: they were coalitions *against* (the Communists) more than *in favour* (of a coherent program). These coalitions could not ‘withstand’ the weight of authoritative and transformation-prone leaders. Such leaders could only be accepted during periods of crisis, of transition from one political balance to another, or if nothing better was available. But day-to-day politics required a low-profile leader skilled in the art of mediation, whose degree of acceptance by the other political figures was directly proportional to his lack of interest in advancing his own personal agenda. In sum, the climate of consensualism of the Cold War period could hardly admit of forceful leaders. At the end of the day, consensualism is a form of democratic collectivism, a manner of operating the political process based on shared decision-making power and opaque accountability.

It could be argued that, in that period, the functioning of a consensus democracy corresponded to a cognitive predisposition (of anti-transformative or conservative type), which was widespread not only in the political elite but generally in the country’s establishment. The predisposition was grounded on a negative view of leadership (probably as an effect of the dramatic consequences of the fascist regime, with its authoritarian interpretation of the charismatic leader, Barbera 2009), a vision that had created a widespread public spirit contrary to personal leaderships, clear decision-making and consistent innovation. However, the fear of the ‘tyrant’ was transformed into a celebration of oligarchic government. Government with a leader was demonized in favour of government without a leader, or better with several (albeit similar) leaders. Thus, following a long historical tradition, even in republican Italy emerged a professional political class quite stable in its positions of power.

By the 1990s, and especially during the 2000s, this leaderless style of government has disappeared. For the first time, Italian governments, in particular the centre-right governments, were led by an outright Prince, an head of government who has summed up in himself the entire political project of the coalition (Fabbrini 2011a). There are several reasons for the impetuous ascent of a
Prince, in both electoral and decision-making terms. First of all, we must consider the decline of political parties and of the collective identities that they had historically represented. This decline was the result of historical changes in the structure of social divisions. This de-structuring process has produced a more individualistic Italian society, organised around special professional or social groups and culturally corporative (Martinelli and Chiesi 2001). In such an environment, it is harder for weak and de-structured political parties to bring together and represent segments of society. Therefore, like in other countries, they are increasingly relying on the aggregating capacities of their leaders. Moreover, in Italy, the void left by the traditional political party system has been filled not simply by new parties, but by personalistic or leader-centred parties (Bardi, Ignazi and Massari 2007).

Political communication too has become increasingly personalised, in consequence of the spread of television as the main educational and information medium. This personalization has accentuated the disintegration of the earlier cleavages, while at the same time providing a solution to overcome the breakdown of the old parties representing those cleavages. Since the 1990s, Italy has become a genuine tele-democracy. Television, by personalising political competition, has transformed the latter into a acrimonious fight between ‘friends and enemies’ (of Silvio Berlusconi). In Italy, the fact that a TV tycoon has become the country’s key political figure has fostered the acceleration of the personalisation of politics, an unprecedented process in the country’s history, but also far more pronounced than in any other country. After all, in no other Western democracy the top TV entrepreneur has become the country’s leading political player as well.

Lastly, one should also consider the effects of the new electoral reform of 2005, thus adopted in the parliamentary elections of 2006 and 2008. This reform (introduced by the centre-right majority) scrapped the uninominal-plurality system which characterized the 1993 electoral system, in favour of a proportional representation system with a majority bonus and closed party lists (D’Alimonte and Chiaramonte 2007). The 2005 electoral system has kept the bipolarising logic as the previous system (because of the majority bonus given to the party or coalition of parties that has got the plurality of vote at national level), but that logic was ‘organized’ in a quite different way than the latter. In fact, the 2005 reform has ended up creating a parliament of appointed rather than elected members, as voters have been deprived of the possibility to select and vote the candidates they preferred. According to this electoral system, in fact, in each constituency the parties submit closed lists of candidates, selected and in the order decided by the party leaders, without giving the voters any chance for choosing among them. The electors have to vote the entire list, but not its candidates. Once established the number of seats to allocate to the parties, the constituency lists
will have their candidates elected to the parliament according to the order in the list. Moreover, any national leader of a party may ‘head’ several constituency lists, thus deciding after the election which one of those lists he or she wants to use for entering in the parliament (a choice which has consequences for the candidates who are located at the end of the various constituency lists). As a result of this electoral reform, parliament has lost its institutional identity and, with it, its representative capacity. It can safely be said that, after the electoral reform, the parliament has become an institution at the disposal of the leaders in the government. In no other Western parliamentary democracy has there ever been such a suspension of the role of the representatives. Parliamentarians have become a mere annex of the their political party leaders who decide the composition and the order of the lists.

The implications of Europeanisation

This centrality of the prime minister in the governmental process has received formidable support also from the processes of Europeanisation and internationalisation of Italian politics. In all democratic countries (Hill 2003) these processes have led to a strengthening of the executive. After all, it is the leaders who attend the G20 summits, the leaders who make the decisions within the European Council, the leaders who speak at the press conferences. It is the leaders who must make decisions in the frantic negotiations that take place at intergovernmental conferences. This upward shift (i.e., towards the supranational and international level) in the decision-making arena has determined a squeeze in the importance of the domestic arena. A striking discrepancy has emerged in all EU member states. While policies are increasingly decided or defined or regulated at the EU level, politics has remained a national business (Schmidt 2006).

In Italy too the government has become prominent vis-à-vis the parliament in the domestic arena as an effect of the process of Europeanization (Fabbrini 2003). However, that has not meant that the government has been able to transfer its domestic prominence in the European arena. Indeed, the game played in Brussels has resulted highly complex. The EU is a pluralistic arena, where the competition between 27 member states’ governments tends inevitably to reduce the influence of each of them, unless a government represents a powerful and coherent member state, which has never been the case of the Italian government. Italian political elites seem not to have fully grasped the implications of the process of Europeanization. Very few of them have not been affected by the cognitive dissociation between policies and politics. Indeed, in the Berlusconi’s era, domestic politics has achieved unprecedented levels of litigation and polarization, filling all the first pages of newspapers and the first lines of the TV news. During the first decade of the 21st century,
the country has increasingly concentrated the attention on its own backyard. The anomalies of the centre-right (such as having a TV tycoon as head of government, Fabbrini, 2011b), the dampening of its European spirit (following the arrival in the government of Northern League politicians opposed to EU integration), the inadequate international culture of the main centre-left party leaders, have thus contributed to downscaling Italy’s influence in Europe.

Thus, although Italy has made a decisive contribution to the process of European integration, despite having individual political leaders and senior officials and diplomats who continue to play a crucial role in the European arena, the background culture of the Italian post-Cold War political class has resulted to be rather parochial. Europeanisation has strengthened the government internally, but it has failed to foster a similar process externally. Indeed, as it was never in the past (Fabbrini and Piattoni 2008), in the budgetary crisis of the summer 2011 Italy has seemed to be governed from outside institutions, from the European Central Bank to the governments of Germany and France.

An unbalanced democracy

In Italy, the rise of the executive, and of its leader, has taken place within an institutional framework designed for strong parties and weak governments. Once the strong parties of the past have gone (necessarily so), only the weak institutions of the governmental system have remained. Because no encompassing parties have emerged in the post-Cold War era, Italian governments have maintained a highly coalitional nature, both in the centre-left and the centre-right. This has triggered a permanent condition of internal rivalry between the different party factions of the various majority’s coalitions. Even the more significant parties (such as the Party of Liberty or PDL or the Democratic Party or PD) of the two coalitions have shown to be unable of performing the essential function of aggregating individual and social interests, as the main parties of the previous period (such as the DC and PCI) had managed to achieve, although with varying degrees of effectiveness (Sartori 1976, now 2005). In Italy, it has no longer been the parties to aggregate the different interests but the latter to use the parties for promoting their specific demands.

According to some (Nardozzi 2010), it is almost like watching a modern-day version of Medieval Italy and its many ‘towers of San Gimignano’, built by a society divided into family clans constantly fighting against each other to assert their supremacy within the city, without realizing that this internal strife was simply consuming their energies, draining themselves of the necessary strength to promote the collective interests of the cities they belonged to against external powers. Deprived of ideological or policy or ethical filters, political parties have become like unclaimed
territories available for anyone – groups, lobbies, associations (and even criminal organizations) – to claim or win. Their name has become a brand that can be leased, a trademark used to promote various interests. Italian democracy has at last acquired a government, but the political foundations of this government have continued to be rather shaky.

This uncertain political environment could not be countered by the institutional system. The increased political empowerment of the executive and its leader has not been accompanied by the streamlining of its institutional structure. The head of the government has continued to be challenged by the leaders of the other coalition parties (a very widespread practice during the centre-left governments), to the point of questioning the operational independence of the executive institution. The head of the government in Italy cannot remove a minister who publicly disagrees with his policies, because parliament still gives its confidence to the government as a whole, and not just to its head, despite the fact that, since the 1996 elections, the main coalitions have campaigned under the name of their candidate to the post of prime minister. However, also due to the abnormal condition of conflict of interests of the principal political leader of the country (Mr. Berlusconi), any request of reform the governmental system has encountered understandable suspicions and resistances in the public opinion. Indeed, the possible reform has been perceived as a way of empowering further an already powerful leader, as testified by the popular refusal, in the 2005 referendum, of a constitutional reform aimed, among others changes, to strengthening the prime ministerial office.

The net result of this has been weak institutions and weak parties. In this context individual politicians or party groups have pursued their own interest, in disregard of an accountability relation with their electors. This is precisely what happened during the confidence vote in parliament for Mr. Berlusconi and his government, on December 14, 2010, during which several members elected in centre-left parties ‘crossed the floor’, so to speak, and voted in favour of the centre-right government, thus re-balancing the move of previously centre-right parliamentarians to vote against the government; this was not the first case, nor will it be the last, of turncoat politics (or “trasformismo”) and turncoat politicians (“trasformisti”). Some scholars (Romanelli 1990) have rightly highlighted how “trasformismo” is deeply rooted in the Italian parliamentary system. However, one might argue that, in the past, shifting political allegiance was often motivated by the need to protect certain communities or electoral constituencies, the politicians concerned being more attached to their local or functional interests than to party loyalty. On the contrary, this recent brand of “trasformismo” seems to be based on personal interest, rather than on community motives. Here, thus, the paradox. The executive power has become more relevant than the legislative power
in the decision-making process, but that relevance has not been translated neither in institutional nor in political strength.

**The weakness of the opposition**

This paradox has concerned also the opposition. Notwithstanding the bipolar logic at the electoral level, once in parliament the parties of the losing coalition have jealously retained their operative and organizational independence. Thus, the political checks on the executive have not operated as required in a competitive parliamentary democracy. The parliamentary opposition has proved to be generally weak and internally divided also because the institution that should have to promote it – namely, the parliament – has been sorely weakened, as we have seen. There is no shadow cabinet in the Italian parliament, capable of engaging the members of the government in debates and challenging both their policies and politics. Moreover, the unequal distribution of information resources between the principal political coalitions has been a further element of unbalance in political relations. Moreover, the persistence of centrist parties has created a need of distinctiveness between the parties in opposition which has weakened the systemic function of the opposition. Weak oppositions have justified not cohesive governments, which, on the contrary, are encouraged to act in a more disciplined fashion when challenged by a strong opposition.

The parliament has been unable to reform itself for facing the consequences of the verticalisation of national politics. A two-chamber parliament with more than 945 members is inadequate for effectively checking the decisions taken by the national government, in particular when they operate in the European and international arenas. The Italian parliament continues to be a plethoric institution, as regards its membership, and operationally redundant, as regards its internal procedures. Its key purpose seems to have become the satisfaction of the social necessities of its members (Rizzo and Stella 2007), rather than those of keeping under control the government. Lacking a radical overhauling and streamlining of parliament (drastic halving in the membership of both chambers, abolition of the system of symmetrical bicameralism with only the popular chamber performing the role of giving/refusing confidence to the government, strengthening of the technical supports for providing members of parliament – and especially those in opposition – the necessary and effective tools for checking the executive), and lacking reform of the electoral system for re-establishing a link between representatives and voters, in short, lacking certain basic reforms, it will hardly be possible to build the conditions for establishing a parliamentary opposition capable of checking both the government and its leader.
However, these institutional changes cannot be effective if they are not also accompanied by a reframing of the cognitive attitude of the political elite, which should acknowledge the need to create stronger institutions for regulating strength and control of governmental power. An elite, moreover, able to understand the complexity of the European and international context of which Italy is a part. An elite that does not transfer to Brussels the responsibility (and the blame) for decisions it is unable to make at home, as it has happened in the dramatic budgetary crisis of the summer 2011. In brief, while systemic pressures have driven a strengthening of the role of the executive and its leader, cultural inertia and institutional resistance have prevented this double strengthening from being accompanied by a rebalancing and checking strategy.

**Conclusion**

The institutional weakness of Italian democracy has become even more worrying when one realise that the growth of importance of the executive and its leader is hardly reversible, precisely for the structural reasons that have supported and continue to support it. Weak government can weaken a country and its democracy. A government capable of governing is a *public good*, for both the national and the European and international communities. However, the strength of democracy depends also from cultural factors. If strength means also authoritativeness, knowledge of problems, seriousness of action and compliance with undertakings, if strength is, in a word, *reputation*, then Italy still has a long way to go. The Italian government has undoubtedly acquired a central role in the decision-making process, but this role is still being played out within a fuzzy institutional and cultural framework. In his address at the Teatro Regio in Turin, on 22 April 2009, the President of the Republic observed that Italian democracy needs to be reformed. There is a need to promote “a different balance between government and Parliament, between the executive and legislative powers”, to determine “which effective further elements for strengthening the government, and its head, can be introduced, based on transparent and convincing reasons”, against a backdrop of overhauled checks and balances. Will the Italian parliamentary republic be able to find a new institutional equilibrium?
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