

Letta on the Crest of a Wave

Judith Harris (November 17, 2013)



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ROME - Stormy seas lie ahead, but for the moment Premier Enrico Letta is riding on the crest of a wave. With the now definitive splintering of former Premier Silvio Berlusconi's highly personalized political party, his formally reborn Forza Italia passes into the minority. The split came about because



Angelino Alfano, who was Berlusconi's second-in-command in the so-called "Freedom Party" (PdL), successor to the original Forza Italia, with its soccer-game overtones, held firm together with Letta and a group of defectors who included Fabrizio Cicchitto.

This gives the present emergency government, erroneously dubbed the "great entente coalition" (given its inner conflicts to date), sufficient votes in both Chamber of Deputies and Senate to continue to remain in power. Letta hopes to remain in office until at least 2015, and Alfano's defection from Berlusconi gives Letta more than a helping hand. It is a victory for stability which will, with luck, postpone the new national general elections for which Berlusconi has been lobbying. With Alfano now are 26 or 27 deputies and 30 senators. In a future vote of confidence for the government Letta should therefore be able to count on a comfortable 381 votes in the 630-seat Chamber, where the absolute majority is 316, and 168 (172, according to *Il Sole-24 Ore*) in the 321-seat Senate, where the absolute majority is narrower at 161 votes

Berlusconi himself believes that the PD and Letta personally will emerge from the PD national congress Dec. 8 weakened when the youthful Florentine Mayor Matteo Renzi makes his predicted formal debut onto the national scene. And there is always the possibility that the splinter Alfano group and the Partito Democratico (PD) behind Letta decide to self-destruct in clashes over taxation; the European Union is pressuring Italy to take a much firmer approach upon dealing with its national debt. There is also the divisive question of whether Letta's Interior Minister Anna Maria Cancellieri overstepped ethical and perhaps legal boundaries by intervening on behalf of a friend's daughter in prison. Phone records prove that she did intervene, as she had denied. As a result Cancellieri has been under pressure to resign, but Letta defends her for obscure reasons.

Interestingly, both Alfano and Berlusconi were extraordinarily polite to each other despite the schism. The definitely less than youthful Forza Italia crowd listening to Berlusconi speak in Rome Saturday were shouting, "Traitor!" and "Buffoon!" until he hushed them, saying that he was personally wounded by Alfano, who had been "like a son" to him. (For a few minutes of Berlusconi speaking live, see: <http://video.corriere.it/berlusconi-strappo-prima-si-commuove-poi-prende-giro-alfano/173a80ca-4eb2-11e3-80a5-bffb044a7c4e>.) "The news [of the defections] gave me great pain," Berlusconi said, alternating between jokes and tears for a talk in which he denounced Communism ("the most criminal ideology in history"), the magistrates "who want to bring the left into power," the EU, the Euro and Angela Merkel equally. "But I'm still an optimist," he said. "We'll keep trying." Toward the end of his 90-minute, emotional oration he seemed overwhelmed and about to pass out, until his doctor stepped forward with a glass of water enriched with whatever one gives to athletes, as the doctor acknowledged. (See: <http://video.corriere.it/piccolo-mancamento-berlusconi-palco-roma/441b412e-4eb7-11e3-80a5-bffb044a7c4e>)

What does all this mean? "Sad hawks," was one headline. Some here are saying that it's the "archiving" of Berlusconi himself, finally his moment of "autumn leaves falling." Said Paolo Mieli, former editor of *Corriere della Sera* and anything but a rabid leftist, speaking in a Saturday talk show, "For the past 20 years Berlusconi has been losing bits chunks of his support. This is just one more. It really means the end is near."

After announcing the definitive split and creation of a new group being called "New Center Right" (Nuovo Centro Destra, name which Berlusconi mocked as insipid) Alfano came directly Saturday afternoon to a jam-packed press conference at the Foreign Press Association in Rome. "We made our decision when we saw that the PdL was opting for early elections," he said. The separation and creation of a new Parliamentary group had been "painful and embittering," but necessary, "because we love Italy." He also said that he continued to have "the deepest affection" for his former mentor, and predicted that at some future time, since both are political conservatives, he would not rule out



the possibility for a new coalition together. He also announced that the new group would not vote to have Berlusconi stripped of his senatorial status.

If anyone was exulting over all this, they were brought down to earth by the economy, which continues to pose a grave problem. The EU has rapped Letta's knuckles for allegedly overly optimistic predictions for 2014. Some troubling statistics show that all is not well: Codacons, the consumer association, is predicting that the austerity Christmas shopping will be down by 7.5% while prices rise because of a hike in the VAT tax. Spending on clothing and shoes is down by 11% this year over last year, travel down by 8.5% and spending in restaurants and cafes, by 8% this year over last year. And spending on foodstuffs has dropped by \$2.7 billion annually, according to a new study by the Istituto dell'Unioncamere, an association of chambers of commerce, crafts and agriculture.

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