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OP-EDS

America Loves Monti—and just maybe, so does Italy

JUDITH HARRIS (February 11, 2012)



A subtle and sober intellectual economist in a discreet blue suit, the new "emergency premier" marks a departure from the recent Italian past. For one, he is hailed and respected abroad...

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ROME – He came, he saw, he conquered. On his visit to the U.S. this week, where he met with financiers like George Soros in New York and then with President Barack Obama in Washington, Italy's emergency Premier Mario Monti was hailed with a degree of approval accorded to no Italian politician, save for President Giorgio Napolitano, in literally decades.

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His visit was a triumph even before he left Italy, with U.S. Ambassador to Italy David Thorne fairly gushing on the eve of departure, "I think Italy has become the most trustworthy U.S. ally in Europe." As icing on the cake, Time magazine featured Monti on its cover with the headline, "Can This Man Save Europe?" In fact, his

visit to Brussels the previous week he was hailed by European leaders, to the point that the Sarkozy-Merkel duet finally became a trio.

Whoops, did I just call Monti a “politician”? Whatever happened to Professor Monti, the subtle and sober intellectual economist in the discreet blue suit? Wasn’t this the dull technocrat asked to babysit Italy, but only until its finances are back on the straight and narrow, so that the politicians can grab back the reins of power? Public opinion polls provide the answer: Monti is as popular in Italy as in Washington. They show that Monti, in power for less than three months, commands an extraordinarily high approval rating, 60%, a notch higher still than the previous week. And lest anyone say that his is a putsch, he has sailed through a series of votes of confidence, meaning that he has been voted into office by the Parliament.

The real question, then, is whatever happened to Italy’s political parties? By stark contrast with the approval for Monti, they continue to sink like a stone in public opinion. Today only 10% of Italians express confidence in parties of any stripe. This disaffection is aggravated by a Niagara Falls of scandals over missing funds from party financing that are somehow suddenly surfacing. Not surprisingly, then, nine out of ten Italians refuse to identify with the political parties that have been running the show for the past two decades. And as polls also show, some 50% of Italians are so disgusted with the political Establishment that they say that, if a new election were called, they either don’t know for whom to vote, or would turn in either a blank ballot or not vote at all.

Like the political parties, Parliament itself, and confidence in its representation of Italians, is a losing ground. Under the headline, “Frankenstein in Parliament,” Massimo Giannini of La Repubblica put it succinctly Saturday: “As in the sleep of reason, this marriage between a ‘weird’ government [Monti’s] and Parliament is generating monsters: 2,400 amendments presented at the Senate on a decree for liberalization [of public ownership of corporations] offends common sense and good taste.” His bitter conclusion was that any Parliament with a sense of responsibility would already have passed the bill.

This makes it all the more likely that, as commentators here are falling all over themselves to say, for the moment Monti looks more and more like the once and future king, and very difficult to unseat in the future with or without a political party behind him at present. As a La Stampa commentator maintains, unseating the man who may save Italy from a Greek-style disaster will be extremely difficult. From political appointee in a desperate situation to politician in his own right should not be an impossible step.

Not surprisingly, then, tensions are beginning to surface within former Premier Silvio Berlusconi’s “Freedom Party,” the Partito della Liberta’ (PdL). Their debate is officially over the validity of the biparty system—until now the official PdL preference—versus possible larger and more heterogeneous coalitions. Some in the PdL balk at the sudden reversal in favor of an alliance with centrist parties, but this week a PdL delegation met with representatives of the so-called “Third Pole”, headed respectively by Pier Ferdinando Casini, Gianfranco Fini and Francesco Rutelli. The two sides agreed to beginning to consider a system “which does not make politically-forced coalitions.”

Berlusconi himself is said to be softening his approach, and talking about a possible grand coalition: why should Monti be the only politician to be seen as savior of the nation? This suggests that Berlusconi is giving up on his alliance with the truculent Umberto Bossi’s Northern League. That the League has noticed this is fairly obvious; its younger, healthier leaders are plainly jostling among themselves for larger roles, even as they then rush to embrace each other for a friendly togetherness photo.

If Monti’s success continues, the specter of elections in 2012 will continue to fade. Presuming this dismal legislature limps forward to its natural end after a five-year term in the Spring of 2013, the present Parliament will be out, and a newly elected Chamber and Senate will choose a successor to President Napolitano for a seven-year term. Unless a cataclysm strikes Italy, it is hard not to believe that Monti will not play a key role.

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