

## THE CONVERSATION

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EPA/Pasquale Bove

# Matteo Renzi just killed off Italy's centre left

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Former prime minister Matteo Renzi has resigned as leader of the Italian Democratic Party (PD) in a move that leaves the country's centre left in ruins. His party is now split, which gives the far right an opportunity to seize government after the next election.

Renzi's departure was inevitable. He lost a **crucial constitutional referendum** in December and resigned as prime minister shortly afterwards, to be replaced by his former foreign minister, Paolo Gentiloni.

Smarting from his defeat in the constitutional referendum, and having had to fulfil his promise to the electorate to resign if he lost, Renzi's tactics have been fuelled by his determination to return to office as soon as possible.

This meant resigning and getting re-elected as leader of the party before going on to win a general election as the prime-ministerial candidate of the PD. It has been widely recognised since his appointment that Gentiloni is merely a stop-gap PM.

Renzi thought he could achieve all this by June (at the latest September) of this year. The left-wing minority inside the PD had other ideas. Their view was that, with the defeat in the referendum, the Renzi experiment was over and that the party needed to find an alternative direction and a different

### Author



**Martin J. Bull**

Professor of Politics, University of Salford

leader. They wanted to keep Gentiloni in office until the end of the parliamentary term in 2018 while the party found a successor, and for Renzi to stand aside.



Gentiloni, Renzi and party president Matteo Orfini getting on like a house on fire at the assembly. EPA/Giuseppe Lami

Renzi, however, was having none of it. “The minority has the right to defeat me but not to eliminate me,” he said. He called the party Assembly together, presented his proposals, refused to compromise and then played his ace card: resigning as leader, thus forcing the pace of events. The minority had little choice at this stage but to exit the party (although not all of them announced they would).

### **An enduring division**

While the current divisions in the PD were prompted by the referendum, the roots go much deeper – indeed, they go back to the founding of the party itself in 2007.

The PD was born of the Olive Tree Coalition (Ulivo), which brought together in alliance two great political traditions in post-war Italy: democratic socialism (as represented by the Democrats of the Left, heirs of the former Communist Party) and progressive Catholicism (the Margherita, or “Daisy”, heirs of the former Christian Democratic Party).

Between 1996 and 2008, Ulivo produced four governments, including two under Romano Prodi and one under Massimo D’Alema, the first former communist ever to be prime minister in Italy. The PD, coming to life during Prodi’s second government, was a merger of these two great political traditions. Its aim was to provide, for the first time in Italy, a single political force of the progressive centre-left realistically large enough to compete for office with the centre right.

Yet, despite producing three prime ministers (Gianni Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni) in the ten years since its founding, and despite winning more than 40% of the vote in the 2014 European

elections, the PD has never won a general election with an outright majority. Letta was head of a grand coalition and was replaced by Renzi without an election taking place. Renzi was subsequently replaced by Gentiloni following the constitutional referendum defeat.

The PD has never successfully integrated the two former parties into one. Indeed, the two souls of communism and Christian democracy have persisted in the PD. The division has shaped its factions and political debate, as well as its positions on issues such as education, work, welfare, inequality and institutional reform.

## One-man band

Renzi's leadership, in particular, has been a jarring experience for the left-wing of the party. He rose to prominence on the basis of a campaign promising to scrap the old leadership of the PD because of its inadequacies. His has been a very individualistic leadership, based on his own beliefs, charisma and personality, and the PD has, it is said, been effectively replaced by the PdR ("Party of Renzi"). His belief in constitutional reform was shaped, he claimed, by the need to improve the efficiency of the Italian political system. His detractors in the party saw it as a means of increasing the power of the prime minister's office and therefore of Renzi himself, and they resolutely opposed the reform.

For the minority, therefore, the PD's main problem had become Renzi himself. And since the prospects of removing him seemed more remote than ever after his latest manoeuvre, the only other alternative was to leave. In this sense, it is the end of the PD as we know it.



Renzi addresses his party. EPA

The party now faces an uncertain future. Numerically speaking, the loss of the left-wing minority does not look significant. The departing parliamentary deputies will likely number between 20 and 30, and

they will probably merge with an existing dissident “Italian Left” group of 17 to construct a new political force in parliament.

Yet, the group includes highly influential figures such as former leader Pier Luigi Bersani. Moreover, in the current party system – based, according to polls, on a rough tripolarity between the populist forces, a more moderate centre right and the centre left – the departure of a small group of dissident MPs means a lot. It consigns to the dustbin the PD’s vocation of a single party majority government and simply recreates the necessity of an alliance between the centre-left and the left to govern.

It also gives a huge fillip to the populist Five Star Movement and the Northern League, which now feel closer than ever to seizing office whenever elections are called. Ironically, therefore, even though Renzi’s hard line is likely to consolidate his leadership of the PD and increase his internal dominance, it may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

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