

The parties of opposition in the aftermath of the election

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At the end of 2008, the centre-left parties opposed to Berlusconi and the centre right found themselves in sets of circumstances that could not have been more profoundly different as compared to the situation they had been in at the beginning of the year. Three of them (four, if one counts the Sinistra Democratica, SD) had not only been expelled from government but expelled from Parliament altogether. Two of them (three if one counts the Radicals) had retained seats in Parliament but were now part of a much less fragmented party system, one that in the election's immediate aftermath had seemed likely to involve them in much more straightforward and adversarial – if civil – patterns of interaction with the parties of government than had been true in the past. One of them (Italia dei Valori, IdV) though losing its place in government, had achieved a spectacular growth in support, and this together with the changed party-system context, had given it a much higher profile as a spearhead for the expression of increasingly widespread anti-political sentiments.

All of this was, of course, a direct consequence of the general election, and under these circumstances, an analysis of the behaviour of the parties of the centre left during the initial months of the Berlusconi government is important for at least two reasons. In the first place, the fact that the election's significance was as profound for these parties and their role in the political system as it was for other actors and institutions means that investigation of how they reacted to the new strategic situation in which they found themselves can potentially tell us much about the significance of the election – seemingly a watershed event – for the political system as a whole. In the second place, opposition, as we have written elsewhere, 'lies at the core of democratic processes since the right to dissent from the views of government is perhaps *the* characteristic that sets off regimes which we call "democratic" from other types'. Moreover, 'it is largely upon the strength of oppositions – and therefore the incisiveness with which they are able to criticise the actions of governments – that the degree to which the latter are held accountable to voters ultimately rests' (Newell, 2003: 79). Therefore, an analysis of the way in which the former governing parties conducted themselves following the election can tell us much about the quality of Italian democracy in the present conjuncture – especially bearing in mind that the government that took office in 2008 did so in circumstances that, barring unforeseen events, looked likely to make it the strongest in Italy's post-war history.

Since it was the election outcome that established the main parameters of the context within which the parties would have to develop their strategies, the first section the follows considers the main problems and opportunities the event created for them. The subsequent sections consider how they reacted in the months following. The final section concludes.

The implications of the election

The Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) went into the election with the goal, if not of winning, then of bringing about a radical simplification of the party system – in the hope that, in so doing, it would free itself from the encumbrance of the left and the need to compete ‘by fielding the broadest coalition possible regardless of its actual capacity to govern the country’ (Veltroni, 2007: 20). Running alone (or almost) would allow the party: to appeal the more effectively to centrist voters potentially alarmed by the rightwards lurch of the coalition led by Berlusconi; to mark a break with the unpopular Prodi government; to convey the theme of novelty; to encourage voters to think in prospective terms; to encourage supporters of the left to converge on the party with the best chance of stopping Berlusconi. Even if the resulting support was insufficient to secure victory, the party’s decision to run alone would probably simplify the party system by raising the thresholds its former allies would have to clear and thus reduce the number of parties with which it would have to share the 45 percent of parliamentary places not awarded as part of the majority premium.

The PD was, of course, successful, at least at the parliamentary level, in simplifying the party system, that is, in achieving its second goal. Such outcome did not in fact bring that freedom from the encumbrance of the left that had been hoped for, however, and this was due to the fact that the party failed to achieve its first goal, i.e. to win. Some of those who had voted for one of the Sinistra Arcobaleno (Rainbow Left, SA) parties in 2006 *did* heed the call to vote tactically; but they only amounted to about a third of them. Meanwhile, Veltroni was unable to make any real headway in the centre where, on the contrary, he lost to the UDC the votes of those apparently disappointed with the performance of the Prodi government but unwilling to express that disappointment by going as far as to vote for ‘the other side’ (Buzzanca, 2008; Carbone and Newell, 2008, Chiaramonte, 2009; Consortium, 2008; Mannheimer, 2008a). The upshot was that the largest formation on the centre left, at 33.2 percent of the vote, remained essentially where its constituent parties – the Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats, DS), the Margherita and some of the Radicals – had been in 2006 (at some 32-3 percent), and remained smaller than the largest centre-right formation – just as had been the case at every election but one since 1994: Table 1. Since the majority premium is awarded to the coalition or single list with the largest number of votes, and since Italian voters showed themselves as unlikely to cross the basic centre-left/centre-right divide as they had ever been (Natale, 2008) (tending to deal with dissatisfaction by abstaining or switching to another party within the same coalition) Veltroni was left with this awareness: if he runs alone, he is always likely to be beaten by Berlusconi. This argues in favour of the construction of alliances, especially in view of the local elections due in 2009 when the PD will be in danger of losing a number of important local authorities if it refuses to ally itself with the far left (Pasquino, 2009).

On the other hand, the construction of alliances is not without its own problems, so that the PD must also pay attention to the only alternative means it has of winning, namely, by somehow managing to broaden the base of its support to its right and to its left. That is, if Veltroni seeks to beat Berlusconi by building coalitions with other parties,

then, as the run-up to 2008 shows (when his decision to run alone enabled Berlusconi to do without the UDC), what this does is to alter the strategic context within which Berlusconi has to make his *own* alliance decisions. In other words, the almost certain result of a centre-left decision to re-admit other parties to the political game is that the centre right would do the same. Be that as it may, the figures for the 2008 election suggest – Table 2 – that in order to have a realistic chance of regaining power, the centre left would have to seek alliance both with the UDC and with the parties it turned away last time round. As Mastropaolo (2009) puts it, ‘The left can profit from the centre right’s governing failures but only on condition that it remains united, if possible including some fragments of the centre right’.

That the centre left faces huge obstacles in the way of victory, whether this is sought by alliance construction, expanding its own support base or a combination of the two, is apparent as soon as one reflects upon the fact that since the war, the left has formed a government only twice in the course of sixteen legislatures, has been in office for seven years out of sixty and that none of its leaders has ever succeeded in obtaining 50 percent plus one of the vote (Ricolfi, 2008: 50-1). In other words, it has been in a permanent minority – and one cannot help feeling that at least some of the reasons have to do with basic cultural deficits making it very difficult for it to engage with issues without thereby adopting the language of the centre right and thus reinforcing its credibility – the main example of this in the 2008 election having been the issue of ‘security’ (Cavazza and Corbetta, 2008; Ricolfi, 2008).

To make the picture even bleaker, one might note that the opposing, centre-right, line-up was better placed, from a communications and propaganda point of view, than any government since the War, to resist any attempts by the centre left to reframe issues to its own advantage. This is because as compared to the governments that preceded it, and especially as compared to the Prodi government, it is well placed, precisely because of its relative compactness, to use communication as a tool in the battle to control the political agenda and therefore to engage in permanent campaigning. In other words, unlike its predecessors, and especially its immediate predecessor, whose composition left it constantly exposed to the media’s need for conflict (Roncarolo and Belluati, 2008), it has a fairly good chance of being able to use support mobilisation as a key resource for governing, while using governing as an instrument to build and sustain support – essential for survival in mediated democracies. One indicator of the Government’s success in this respect came with publication, on 15 October, of the results of an Ipr poll showing an increase since May in the approval ratings of Government and Prime Minister from 49 to 54 and 53 to 62 percent respectively (Fusani, 2008). Even allowing for the fact that the polling was conducted at a moment when the international financial crisis was dominating headlines (and thus even allowing for the well-known tendency for incumbents to gain in popularity in moments of deep crisis) this was an impressive performance.

The awareness the election left the parties of the SA with, on the other hand, was probably that, with 3.1 percent of the vote and no seats, they had paid the price of the classic dilemma ‘outsider’ parties tend to find themselves in when they attempt to assume

a governing role (Albertazzi, McDonnell and Newell, 2007). That is, if they take robust positions in defence of their constituencies, putting in danger the survival of the executive, they risk losing votes because they are accused of behaving ‘irresponsibly’. On the other hand, if they fail to take such positions then they risk losing the votes of disillusioned core supporters. And this is precisely what appears to have happened at the election: besides the substantial losses to Veltroni’s coalition, the second-largest outflow of votes went in the direction of abstention and minor parties of the extreme left (Buzzanca, 2008; Mannheimer, 2008a; Corbetta, Marcotti and Vanelli, 2008)

But the outcome was arguably less an electoral disaster than it was one that created a considerable organisational headache for the parties. True, their haemorrhage of votes had left them without seats, but the fact that they were no longer a parliamentary force did not mean that they were no longer a force in the country; and as Luca Ricolfi (2008: 52) points out, the far left continues to amount to over 4 percent of the vote, while an additional 2 to 3 percent, having been sacrificed (through the PD’s call for a ‘*voto utile*’) on the alter of the appeal to defeat Berlusconi, could return to the fold. On the other hand, owing to the system of public funding of political parties, the outcome created a financial problem and therefore a threat to the parties’ organisational integrity. In essence, for each general election the law establishes a fund (additional funds are established for regional and other elections), designed to enable parties to cover their election expenses, the fund amounting to €5 for each name appearing in the electoral registers for the Chamber of Deputies plus each name appearing in the electoral registers for the Senate. The resulting sum is then divided among all parties achieving at least 1%, in proportion to their vote. For the 2008 election, therefore, the sum to be divided amounted to $(47,295,978 + 43,257,208) * 5 = €452,765,930$ – except that this amount had been cut by 10 percent in the 2008 Finance Law. The upshot was that the SA parties would receive €13 million – as against the €51 million received by Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation, RC), the Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (Party of Italian Communists, PdCI) and the Greens in 2006 (Lopapa, 2008a: 4). The potential significance of this fall can be appreciated by bearing in mind that in the case of RC for example, approximately two thirds of its income comes from the state (Albertazzi, McDonnell and Newell, 2007).

This would not be such a significant problem were it not for the fact that state funding appears to compensate for the difficulties the parties have in maintaining themselves as free-standing organisations through their own efforts. RC for example, has a membership that is in long-term decline and that struggles to reach five for every one hundred voters: Table 3. Membership turnover is also very high – losses being of the order of 15 per cent per year – where failures to renew membership appear to come far more from the organisational difficulties involved in re-contacting the previous year’s subscribers than from political disagreements as such (for details see Bertolino, 2004: 188-194). If this suggests a rather limited capacity of the party on the ground to inculcate long-term commitments, and a rather limited role in electoral mobilisation, then it implies that the party must rely for support on weakly attached voters and on its expanding central organisation and gradually increasing levels of professionalisation (Bertolino, 2004). But these are processes requiring conspicuous financial resources.

Finally, IdV emerged from the election in a radically contrasting state of health. *Its* share of the resources available as a result of the public funding regime would amount to €18.4 million (compared to the €12 million of two years previously), a consequence of course of the dramatic increase, from 2.3 to 4.4 percent, in its share of the vote – in its turn due to conspicuous inflows of former Ulivo voters, first, and of former supporters of the SA parties, second (Consortium, 2008). Such transfers were indicative of the reason the PD had decided to concede a coalition arrangement with IdV in the first place (i.e. it would allow the disillusioned on the centre left and those driven by anti-political sentiments to remain within the fold of the main centre-left coalition). But the consequences of the decision posed major challenges for the stances the PD, as a competitor party, could now afford to take in the election's aftermath. This was especially so bearing in mind that, as a radical party in a much simplified party system, IdV could expect – by acting as a thorn in the side of a larger opposition ally that had made considerable efforts to project an image of moderation and reasonableness – to attract a level of media attention that the SA parties would now struggle to attract¹ and that it itself had had to compete hard for as one of nine parties in the former government. Let us then begin our analysis of the election's aftermath by considering how IdV exploited its new opportunity, and with what consequences.

Italia dei Valori

Given what we have just said, it was not very surprising that almost the day after the vote, IdV leader, Antonio di Pietro was hard at work outflanking the PD by seeking to consolidate his image as a far more consistent and aggressive, that is *resolute*, opponent of the incumbent government and prime minister than PD leader, Walter Veltroni. In May, the Government sought legislation to circumvent a decision of the European Court of Justice that television frequencies occupied by the Prime Minister's own channel, Retequattro, should be ceded to a rival station, Europa 7. Di Pietro's response was to announce the holding of a popular demonstration outside the Chamber of Deputies, complaining, 'The PD needs to get it into its head that the adversary to be beaten is not me, but Berlusconi' (int., Roncone, 2008: 5). The following month, government proposals to ban telephone tapping (except in organised crime and terrorism investigations) rose to the top of the political agenda, as did proposals providing, first, for the discretionary postponement of trials where the charges did not involve issues of public safety (supposedly to help increase the rate of throughput of the judicial system as a whole), and second, for suspension of judicial proceedings against major public office-holders, including the prime minister, for the duration of their mandates (the so-called *lodo Alfano*). Apparently designed to assist the premier overcome his own legal difficulties, the proposals prompted Di Pietro to express the view that they amounted to a

¹ A rough indicator is given by the results of a search of the Chamber of Deputies electronic archive of newspaper articles (http://rassegna.camera.it/chiosco_new/pagweb/rasseгнаQuotidianaFrame.asp): taking articles published between 15 April and 10 October, and searching for those containing the terms 'Rifondazione', 'PdCI' or 'Verdi' produces 4,357 returns – while searching for those containing the terms 'IdV' or 'Di Pietro', produces 8,395 returns.

democratic emergency the response to which would be the attempt to initiate a series of popular referenda designed to have them struck from the statute books. And as if to give sustenance to the criticisms of PD spokespersons that he was guilty of *massimalismo* (hardly a very damaging criticism given the way in which he was attempting to frame the issues in the first place) he then grabbed media attention by comparing Berlusconi to a pimp,² and by announcing the holding of a demonstration ‘in defence of freedom and democracy’ (Fuccaro, 2008a: 6), on 8 July, in Piazza Navona in Rome. The following month, having set in motion the formal procedures required to instigate a popular referendum against the *lodo Alfano*, the ex-public prosecutor could be found publicly accusing the PD of ‘lethargy’, dubbing it ‘the opposition that isn’t there’ for its refusal to back his initiative (Nigro, 2008a: 9). By September, Di Pietro was announcing another demonstration – fixed for 11 October, again in Piazza Navona, where the process of gathering the signatures necessary to back his referendum request would be initiated.

There is little doubt that, from the point of view of invigorating his party and underpinning its level of popular support, Di Pietro’s strategy was successful, even though the 8 July demonstration suggested that he had to be careful not to let colour and exuberance get out of hand. Then, the event had been hijacked by comedian, Beppe Grillo and film director, Sabrina Guzzanti (Caporale, 2008: 3), whose rabble-rousing anti-political declarations, including attacks on the Pope and the President of the Republic, embroiled Di Pietro in a process of guilt by association and led to a number of high-profile resignations from his party (Lopapa, 2008: 11). Still, in June, he had been explicit in describing his anti-Berlusconi campaign as a path along which he hoped to meet ‘if not all of the PD’s leaders, certainly “a good proportion of its voters”’ (Fuccaro, 2008b: 5) – and indeed, in July he received confirmation that the hope had been reasonable: While suggesting that the gap separating the centre left as a whole from Berlusconi was essentially stable, polls pointed to a significant shift within the coalition, with his party’s support standing at above 7 percent (Biorcio and Bordignon, 2008: 7). He was successful too in winning the sympathy of at least some PD leaders, most notably former Defence Minister, Arturo Parisi; and the reception he was given by PD activists attending the party’s annual festival at the end of August clearly indicated that among its rank and file there was a considerable degree of warmth towards him (Casadio, 2008: 4).

The inevitable tensions that this all brought with the PD leadership were ultimately the consequence of radically contrasting perceptions of the requirements of the moment arising from the contrasting strategic position in which the PD found itself. While needing to appeal successfully to radical spirits, it also, however, needed to appeal to moderate elements located towards the centre of the political spectrum and Di Pietro’s strident anti-Berlusconi rhetoric was perceived as cutting directly across this. For one

² An allusion to Berlusconi’s assertion, in December 2007, that ‘in show business, everyone knows that in certain situations in Italian Radio and Television (RAI) you can only work if you are willing to prostitute yourself or if you are on the left’ (*Corriere della Sera*, 2007). The outburst was provoked by the action of the weekly news magazine, *l’Espresso*, in publishing the transcripts of telephone conversations between Berlusconi and RAI executive, Agostino Saccà. During the conversation, Berlusconi seeks to obtain castings for two actresses as part of an exchange of favours with a senator belonging to the then majority in order to help bring down the Prodi government. It is alleged that in exchange for the castings, Berlusconi had offered Saccà ‘financial, entrepreneurial and political support’ (Del Porto, 2008).

thing, it made virtually impossible any dialogue with the UDC, whose leader, Pierferdinando Casini was explicit in saying that the PD would have to dissociate itself from Di Pietro failing which ‘no strategic alliance’ with his party would be possible (Di Caro, 2008: 5). For another thing the rhetoric was perceived as cutting little ice with ordinary voters located beyond the centre left’s existing confines – voters who, it was felt, rather looked to the coalition to devote greater attention to more ‘material’ issues having to do with the economy and social welfare. In the third place, Di Pietro’s was perceived as an approach that assisted Berlusconi in at least two ways. First it allowed him to dub the opposition as a home to intolerance if not to subversion and therefore as unfit to govern – thus perpetuating those reciprocal denials of legitimacy between government and opposition that would undermine the prospects for dialogue on, for example, constitutional reform. Second, by allowing Berlusconi to demand of the PD repudiation of its ally’s more strident pronouncements, it enabled him, every time Di Pietro made one of his more colourful outbursts, to embarrass the PD and drive a wedge between the opposition parties. Finally, the approach was perceived as dooming the opposition as a whole to inevitable defeat. For example, in explaining his party’s refusal to give official backing to Di Pietro’s referendum initiative, Veltroni drew on observations apparently made by ex-president, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro: “‘A party that sponsors a referendum always gains visibility, regardless of the outcome. But if the initiative were to fail, perhaps because of a failure to achieve the required level of turnout, the opposition as a whole would come off badly’”... With the additional problem that “‘we would risk making Berlusconi appear unbeatable’” (*la Repubblica*, 2008a: 14). It was difficult not have sympathy with Di Pietro’s dry response: “‘If there is a sure way of losing, then it is by never playing the game’” (*la Repubblica*, 2008: 14).

The Partito Democratico

The most newsworthy initiatives undertaken by the PD in the months following the election, then, in one way or another reflected its new ‘intermediate’ location in the party system. That is, it found itself occupying a position that, with a certain historical irony, was very similar to the one that had once been occupied by the old Socialist Party (PSI). If the latter had been caught between the Communist Party to its left and the Christian Democrats to its right, and if it had found the resulting requirement to fight a war on two fronts a fundamental obstacle to its expansion, then the PD was in a very similar position. Whether in order to augment its appeal among voters, or to build bridges to potential party allies, the PD had to find ways of reaching out *both* in the direction of the UDC *and* in the direction of IdV and the left. And the headache for the party would be the more painful the more circumstances conspired to the bring IdV and the left together, increasing their collective capacity to compete with Veltroni’s party. Moreover, if over time, the PSI had found that the dilemmas of its position had caused it to degenerate, gradually turning it into a party of opportunists and ‘business politicians’ largely deprived of any real ideological commitments (della Porta and Vannucci, 1999: 69-92), then it was ironic that more than one commentator (e.g. Paolo Flores d’Arcais, 2008 and Marco Travaglio, 2008) claimed to discern processes at work within the PD that were perhaps not altogether dissimilar.

The PD's initial move following the election was in the direction of enhancing the profile of moderation that had been so central to its election campaign strategy. Thus it was that in setting up a 'shadow cabinet' (clearly designed to enhance the authority of his party despite the body's lack of any *formal, institutional* status) Veltroni was at pains to emphasize that opposition to the Government had to be 'constructive' – a tactic that, initially at least, appeared to bear fruit as Berlusconi reciprocated by insisting that the two held a meeting to initiate a dialogue that would issue in agreed-upon changes to the rules of the game (a meeting that in fact took place on 16 May, just a day after the Government received the second of its two obligatory votes of confidence in Parliament). This seemed to hold out considerable promise for the PD since mutually acceptable institutional reform arguably offered both Berlusconi *and* Veltroni the opportunity of a place in Italian political history as the fathers of a new constitutional settlement. That the thaw between the two 'lasted *l'espace d'un matin*' (Pasquino, 2009) was due to the fact that Veltroni had underestimated the extent to which the decisions Berlusconi would have to take as Prime Minister would be affected by his unsolved conflict of interests – and, in fact, two of the Government's earliest decisions concerned the above-mentioned European Court judgement and the discretionary postponement of judicial proceedings.

Unfortunately for Veltroni, the notably restrained nature of his response ended up giving him the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, it was insufficient to prevent Berlusconi casting doubt on the prospects for dialogue and accusing the PD “*di aver portato in parlamento frange estremiste e giustizialiste*” (Montanari, 2008: 7). On the other hand, Veltroni's attempts to keep hopes of dialogue alive were unable to satisfy radical critics who argued that the effect would be to prevent the opposition from keeping the Government accountable – as earlier attempts at cooperation had suggested would happen. At the time of the Bicameral Commission for Constitutional Reform in 1997, for example, when it had sought to retain the entrepreneur's cooperation by refraining from legislation that would effectively deal with his conflict of interests, the centre left had found that in the end, Berlusconi withdrew cooperation anyway leaving constitutional reform in tatters but his media empire intact. Meanwhile, if 51 percent of those who had voted for the centre left in April judged the opposition to be conducting itself in a 'balanced' way, 41 percent felt that it was 'too docile' (Mannheimer, 2008b: 11).

Thus it was that Veltroni could be found making what looked very much like a U-turn in his approach when, a few days before Di Pietro's Piazza Navona rally, he announced the launch of a 'petition' in defence of democracy and against the Government with the aim of collecting five-million signatures – an initiative that, according to the PD leader's intentions, would culminate in a large demonstration to be held in the autumn. In truth, it was a partial U-turn; for while it signalled the adoption of a more aggressive and confrontational attitude towards the Government, Veltroni remained insistent that he was still willing to talk about reform with the centre right and that while opposition would be 'intransigent', he would not allow himself to be drawn into taking ideological positions or ones involving demonisation; neither would there be any 'blows beneath the belt' (Guerzoni, 2008: 5).

It was a sign of the continuation of a delicate balancing act – an act the party’s leaders would continue, with greater and lesser success to perform over the months that lay ahead. Thus, the arrest on corruption charges of the president of the Abruzzo region, Ottaviano del Turco, at the end of July, and the prospect of fresh elections there in November, posed in very concrete and immediate terms the question of how the party would position itself – to which its coordinator, Goffredo Bettini, was obliged to respond: “*Nessuno vuole andare da solo. Ma noi vogliamo rinnovare la politica in tutto il campo democratico. Perciò è irrealistico*”... “*e addirittura accademico porci oggi la domanda se ci uniamo all’Udc o a Rifondazione*” (Marchis, 2008: 7). At the end of August, when Berlusconi announced the imminent publication of a bill involving the introduction of a 5 per cent threshold for the 2009 European parliament elections, the PD was obliged to reiterate its support for the lower, 3 per cent, threshold that would allow it to keep open its lines of communication with the left.³ In September, on the other hand, the PD’s Senate group leader, Anna Finocchiaro, could be found at the party’s annual festival extending a hand to Pierferdinando Casini by expressing, in a debate with the UDC leader, support for the reintroduction of preference voting and a law on living wills (Troncino, 2008: 13). In October, PD parliamentarians were looking for a way through the interlocking vetoes created by the majority’s refusal to support Leoluca Orlando, the IdV’s preferred choice as president of Parliament’s supervisory commission for radio and television, and on the other hand, IdV’s refusal to support Gaetano Pecorella, Berlusconi’s preferred choice for the position of Constitutional Court judge.⁴ The problem was that a compromise arrangement involving the election of each in exchange for election of the other would have all the appearances of a victory for two adversaries, the PdL and IdV, united by the common objective of wearing down the PD (Franco, 2008: 13). It was not very surprising, then, that observers as diverse as Giancarlo Cesana and Gianfranco Pasquino would both use the term ‘confusion’ in connection with their perceptions of the party (Vecchi, 2008: 12; Buzzi, 2008: 15).

Nor was it surprising that the party’s impasse would give rise to considerable internal difficulties. These were of two kinds. First, there was conflict over the means to overcome it with three broad sets of positions emerging. First, there were those surrounding former Foreign Secretary, Massimo D’Alema, who took the view that the way forward for the party lay in the revival of a strategy for the construction of alliances, one open to the widest range of options possible including an understanding with the Northern League. Second, there were those, surrounding Veltroni, whose inclinations lay

³ Berlusconi’s proposal was designed to allow the PdL to become the largest component within the European People’s Party.

⁴ The impasse arose from two circumstances, in the first place, the convention whereby the presidency of the supervisory commission goes to one of the opposition parties, combined with the numerical requirement for the opposition’s candidate also to have the support of parliamentarians belonging to the majority. In the second place, both IdV and the PD were unhappy with the idea of Pecorella filling the vacant Constitutional Court position because of doubts about his ability to be impartial (he was widely viewed as the principal ‘legal brain’ working on behalf of Berlusconi’s party) and because of accusations of aiding and abetting that had been leveled against him in a terrorist case dating back to the 1970s. And in order for him to be elected, he would require the support of two thirds of the members of Parliament at the first three rounds of voting and three fifths thereafter – too much for Berlusconi to be able to muster on his own.

more in the direction of keeping faith with the ideal that had given birth to the party and who were thus driven by the motto, *‘Meglio soli che male accompagnati’* (Franchi, 2008: 1) Third, there were those surrounding the former defence minister, Arturo Parisi, who took the view that what was required was neither a continuation of the Veltronian strategy of ‘splendid isolation’ (as this would doom the party to constant defeat) nor the search for alliances divorced from any discussion of the programmatic substance on which they would be based, but rather a re-launching of the Ulivo project, that is, a project driven by the search for unity of all the centre-left forces within a new and open entity that would somehow go beyond existing party political models (Nigro, 2008b: 9). Inevitably, debates over these issues became bound up with the second kind of internal difficulty, namely, the authority of Veltroni’s leadership, with those having aspirations to succeed him finding themselves: strengthened by internal reflections on the causes and responsibilities for the general election defeat; aware that the seeming near certainty of a very long period in opposition put time on their side; tempted, by the proximity of the next European Parliament elections to prepare for the possibility of a leadership challenge. These elections would clearly be crucial for Veltroni’s position especially in view of their ‘second order’ nature and thus the expectation that the centre right, as the incumbent government, ought to face difficulties.

It would be going too far to suggest that these various problems can be compared in any simple way with the decline in standards that took place in the PSI. However, internal conflict, the difficulties of having to manage a position sandwiched between vocal rivals, and suspicions that the party’s leaders were too much in ‘cahoots’ with Berlusconi all made it difficult to resist the image of the PD painted by Paolo Flores d’Arcais when he wrote (2008: 4) that the party was ‘by now – above all and for the most part – an integral component of the partitocratic guild’. It was perhaps too much to take one’s cue from Stella and Rizzo and consign the entire party without qualification to the category of those belonging to the ‘cast’;⁵ but well-respected academics (e.g. Ricolfi, 2008: 54-6) too argued that the party was seriously out of touch with popular aspirations. Under such circumstances, the appearance of practices of dubious propriety – such as the apparent cases, in parts of Campania, of local faction leaders seeking to advance their causes through the purchase of blank membership cards and the artificial inflation of enrolments (Damilano, 2008: 72) – should not, perhaps, surprise.

The parties of the left

From the perspective of the parties of the former SA, it seemed reasonable to suppose that the apparent gap separating the PD’s image, and the concerns of ordinary people, would work to their advantage – especially if those who at the general election had lent their vote to the PD (apparently for nought and to a party explicitly ‘not of the left’) could be persuaded to call in their loans. This might provide a solid basis on which to re-build, from a position of relative strength, an understanding with the PD, whose ‘self-sufficiency’ had proved unsustainable, and which might therefore be expected to lose support at the sub-national and European elections in 2009. This was one idea circulating

⁵ The reference here is to the best-selling volume, *La Casta*, by the journalists Sergio Rizzo and Gian Antonio Stella, first published in May 2007.

in and among the former SA parties in the election's aftermath. A second had to do with the future of the SA itself. For the SD, this had to be given another try. Yes, it had been unsuccessful at the election, but this had been due to its character as a discordant federation: what was needed was a constituent process uniting all those parties of the left willing to entertain the idea of the need to rethink fundamentally – in terms of ways of being, acting and communicating – what being on the left now meant. While this would exclude some parties it would, by overcoming existing divisions on the left, enable profitable engagement with the other large parties in the Italian political system, providing the basis for the eventual construction of a new entity of the centre left as a whole.

The idea was one that found some support within RC, notably on the part those surrounding president of the Puglia region, Nichi Vendola, who took the view that notwithstanding the electoral setback, the attempt to create a new united and pluralistic organisation of the left would find an interested audience among pressure-group activists, in the trade unions and among the new social movements. However, at the party's congress at the end of July, Vendola's position, with 47 per cent of the votes, was beaten by that of ex-Social Welfare minister, Paolo Ferrero, with 53. Ferrero's view was that inherent in Vendola's position was a danger of the liquidation of the party – whose organisational reinforcement was on the contrary necessary if one were to avoid the twin danger of left unity being deprived of specific horizons, and the risk of conflict among the potential constituent parties over what the nature of the new organisation was to be.

Meanwhile, both of these currents of thought within RC, and the SD, were opposed to the position taken by a significant proportion of the PdCI in the election's aftermath, a proportion which felt that the electoral debacle had to a not insignificant extent come about because the SA had presented voters with the prospect of the liquidation of communist outlooks within a new non-communist, reformist, organisation that risked ending up in a position of subordination to the PD. This line of thinking, then, was one that opposed left unity in favour of a constituent process that would unite the communist forces, to be achieved, in the first instance, by a merger of the PdCI and RC. Opposed to this perspective were those PdCI activists surrounding Katia Bellillo and Umberto Guidoni who argued, in the run-up to the party's July congress, in favour of a not very well defined unification of the forces of the left and the immediate search for an alliance with the PD.

Finally, the Greens too held a party congress in July, and this saw a face-off between those (notably Marco Boato) in favour of cutting ties with the parties of the left and instead seeking an alliance with the PD, and those (notably Fabio Roggiolani) whose position appeared to amount to an unwillingness to write off the SA experience in its entirety. But though Boato was defeated, in early October, the prospect that the Government's proposed 5 per cent threshold for European Parliament elections would soon become law led the Greens, along with the Socialists, to discuss an arrangement with the PD whereby a few of them would get elected by being offered places on Veltroni's party's lists.

All of this pointed to the extreme dangers facing the parties of the radical left. That is, on the one hand, they all to one degree or another preached the virtues of 'left unity' – but they were divided within and among themselves about the form and the substance of that unity. If this made it seem unlikely that very much would be achieved in that direction in the near future, then it left them prey to being drawn, piecemeal, into the orbit of the PD as immediate decisions had to be made about the line-ups they would field at the various elections in 2009. The PD, for its part, could now, in the changed political context of the autumn of 2008, afford to contemplate alliances in a way that it had not thought possible in the run up to the general election. Then, the imperative had been to establish as much distance as possible between itself and popular perceptions of the Prodi government and mark a break with the tendency to form coalitions 'merely' to win elections, ones unable, then, to govern. Now, however, the government of the country was not at stake, and a refusal to form alliances might come across as obstinacy especially if it were felt that it would consign the party to inevitable defeat. Such refusal also had the significant disadvantage, from Veltroni's point of view, that it would strengthen the hands of those in the party ready to challenge his leadership on precisely these grounds.

It was not surprising, then, that as 2008 drew to a close, the SD seemed also to be very much within Veltroni's sights. Although it had refused the offer of a seat in Strasbourg through the PD's lists, if the 5 percent threshold were introduced then, depending on the stances taken by RC and PdCI, it looked as though its refusal might weaken.⁶ With polls putting RC on around 4 percent (Asca, 2008), it seemed that a joint RC-PdCI list might stand a chance of surmounting the threshold – and in that case it would be very much in Veltroni's interests to get an agreement with the SD as means of weakening the competitors to his left.

Conclusion

We can now answer the question with which we began this chapter, namely, 'What light does the behaviour of the parties of the centre left in the initial months of the Berlusconi government throw on the significance for Italian politics of the 2008 general election?' Our answer is that many of the claims made for its significance appear to be somewhat exaggerated. In the immediate aftermath of the campaign it was suggested (1) that the party system had been revolutionised; (2) that this would bring more straightforward patterns of interaction between cohesive governing and opposition line-ups; (3) that 'the never-ending Italian transition' had 'reached an initial milestone' (Berselli, 2008).

The reality is that (1) in the months following the election the centre left remained as fragmented and litigious as it had been before. The implications of this were not diminished in significance by the reduction in the number of the centre left's parliamentary groups since those that had been expelled from the legislature remained relevant for the alliance decisions that would have to be made in view of future elections.

⁶ Especially in view of the 'consultative agreement' that had been reached between the PD and the SD as early as May (*Corriere della Sera*, 2008: 13)

Consequently, (2) the opposition offered to Berlusconi was far from cohesive: Veltroni and Di Pietro were constantly at loggerheads; the radical left was unable to recreate the unity it had briefly found in the run-up to the election. This should come as no surprise as the potential payoffs deriving from unity were neither immediate nor obvious. In principle, unity between two parties can come in three ways, first, by one merging its identity with that of another. But then it is not clear that the merged party will appeal to any additional voters beyond those who already supported the party that has engulfed the other. Second, parties might form a coalition or federation – but unless it successfully presents itself as more than the sum of its parts, it is unlikely to have an appeal beyond the supporters of its constituent parties and may lose votes if its constituent parties’ supporters are not easily summable. Finally, parties might seek to merge through the creation of a completely new entity having an identity different from that of its founding parties. But this is only likely to be achieved without potentially damaging internal conflict, where a prior consensus has emerged as to what that identity should be. This could certainly not be said to have happened in the case of the PD (whose members continued to argue over the party’s positioning within the framework of party groupings at European level) so how much less reasonable was it to expect it of parties like those of the radical left, whose actions are much more heavily constrained by the attachment to normative principles of various kinds?

As for (3) the Italian transition, it was noteworthy that for all Veltroni’s efforts to secure bipartisanship in institutional change, Berlusconi continued to pursue change for purely partisan purposes on the basis of simple majorities (e.g. over the European parliament electoral law). And for all that Veltroni sought to facilitate dialogue by renouncing the ‘demonisation’ of his opponent, none of it seemed to make any difference to Berlusconi’s proclivity for prioritising legislation designed to benefit him personally or for continuing to demonise *Veltroni*⁷ – which only made even more breath-taking the PD’s embrace – implicit in the denunciation of ‘anti-Berlusconi rhetoric’ – of the entrepreneur’s *own* view that far from being a request for the observance of principles of impartiality, the demand for proper conflict-of-interests legislation was necessarily illegitimate *simply* because he was the one who would be most affected by it.

All of this contributed to an impression that the Veltroni project had fundamentally failed. On the one hand, if it had produced a government that look set to be Italy’s strongest since the War, then it had not made any more likely the prospect of cohesive government of the centre left. On the other hand, as the PD leader continued to preach the end of ‘Berlusconism’ and therefore the end of ‘anti-Berlusconism’, one couldn’t help drawing analogies with the appeasement, several decades earlier, of another European leader and thinking of Marx’s famous dictum that ‘History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce’.

⁷ As happened when, towards the end of October, Berlusconi’s spokesperson, Maurizio Lupi, claimed that the presence of Veltroni on a popular talk show, *Che tempo fa*, “‘less than a week before the demonstration of 25 October, had only one objective: to gain publicity by using the money belonging to television licence payers”” (*la Repubblica*, 2008b).

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Table 1 Percentage of the vote won by the two largest lists fielded by the centre right and centre left respectively, Chamber of Deputies elections, 1994 – 2008

Largest list for:	Election				
	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008
Centre right	21.0	20.6	29.4	36.0	37.3
Centre left	20.4	21.1	16.6	31.3	33.2

Note: in order to compare ‘like with like’, for each of the elections, the lists on the basis of whose scores the above percentages are arrived at, are as follows:

- in 1994: Forza Italia (FI) and the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left, PDS);
- in 1996: FI and the PDS;
- in 2001: FI and the Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats, DS);
- in 2006: the combined vote of FI and Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN), for the centre right, and the Ulivo (formed of the DS and the Margherita), for the centre left;
- in 2008: the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL) formed of FI and AN for the centre right, and the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) formed of the DS and the Margherita, for the centre left.

Table 2 Chamber of Deputies election results 2006 and 2008

2006 election				2008 election				
Parties and alliances	Vote (%)	Vote (%) [*]	Seats (no.)	Parties and alliances	Vote (no.)	Vote (%)	Vote (%) [*]	Seats (no.)
Unione				Walter Veltroni				
L'Ulivo	31.3	30.4	220	Partito Democratico	12,092,998	33.2	32.4	211
Italia dei Valori	2.3	2.2	16	Italia dei Valori	1,593,675	4.4	4.3	28
RC	5.8	5.7	41	Sinistra Arcobaleno	1,124,418	3.1	3.0	0
PdCI	2.3	2.3	16	Partito Socialista	355,581	1.0	1.0	0
Greens	2.0	2.0	15					
La rosa nel pugno	2.6	2.5	18					
Udeur	1.4	1.4	10					
Other Unione parties	2.1	2.0	4					
Total	49.8		340					
<i>Overseas constituency</i>				<i>Overseas constituency</i>				
Unione		1.1	6	Partito Democratico	331,567		0.9	6
Italia dei Valori		0.1	1	Italia dei Valori	41,589		0.1	1
				Sinistra Arcobaleno	28,353		0.1	
Udeur		0.0		Partito Socialista	31,774		0.1	
Total (National + overseas)		49.7	347					
Casa delle libertà				Silvio Berlusconi				
Forza Italia	23.7	23.1	137	Popolo della libertà	13,628,865	37.4	36.5	272
AN	12.3	12.0	71	Northern League	3,024,522	8.3	8.1	60
Northern League	4.6	4.5	26	MPA	410,487	1.1	1.1	8
UDC	6.8	6.6	39	UDC	2,050,319	5.6	5.5	36
DC-New PSI	0.7	0.7	4	La Destra	885,229	2.4	2.4	0
MSFT	0.6	0.6	0					
Other Cdl parties	1.0	1.0	0					
Total	49.7		277					
<i>Overseas constituency</i>				<i>Overseas constituency</i>				
Forza Italia		0.5	3	Popolo della libertà	314,357		0.8	4
Per Italia nel mondo – Tremaglia		0.2	1	UDC	81,450		0.2	
UDC		0.2		La Destra	14,609		0.0	
Northern League		0.0						
Other Cdl parties		0.0						
Total (National + overseas)		49.4	281					
Others				Others				
Autonomie Liberté Democratie (Valle d'Aosta) ⁺	0.1	0.1	1	Autonomie Liberté Democratie (Valle d'Aosta)	23,311	0.1	0.1	1
Others	0.5	0.5		Others	1,161,267	3.4	3.1	2
Others (overseas const.)		0.4	1	Others (overseas const.)	169,387		0.4	1
National total	100.1	97.6	618	National total	36,350,672	100.0	97.5	618
Overseas const. total		2.5	12	Overseas const. total	1,013,086		2.6	12
Overall total		100.1	630	Overall total	37,363,758		100.1	630

Sources:

<http://www.repubblica.it/speciale/2006/elezioni/camera/index.html> (2006 figures).

<http://www.repubblica.it/speciale/2008/elezioni/camera/index.html> (2008 figures).

Notes:

* The percentages in this column are based on the overall total of votes cast, i.e. including the overseas constituency

⁺ Autonomie Liberté Democratie was associated with the Unione. Votes cast in the single-member Valle d'Aosta constituency are not included in the totals used to determine allocation of the majority premium.

Table 3 Voting support and membership of RC, 1992 – 2006

	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006
Chamber elections: n. of votes	2,202,574	2,334,029	3,215,960	1,868,113	2,229,604
N. of members	117,463	113,580	127,073	92,020	92,752*
Members as % of voters	5.3	4.9	4.0	4.9	4.2

Sources: <http://www.ecn.org/reds/prc/VIcongresso/prc0502VIdestini.html>
http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rifondazione_Comunista

Note : * figure is for 2005