Italian Politics in an Era of Recession: the end of Bipolarism?

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Italian politics have undergone momentous change in the 2007-2017 decade under the impact of the eurozone crisis, whose peak in 2011-2013 could be equated to the earlier watershed years of 1992-1994. The lasting impact of the upheaval in Italian politics in the early 1990s could still be felt in the decade of economic recession, but there were also new challenges prompted by a crisis that had its roots in international financial contagion and unravelling under the shadow of both recession and austerity. The changes were of an economic, social, cultural, institutional, policy-oriented and political nature. If one central quintessentially political theme stands out by the end of this decade it is the apparent exhaustion of the quest for bipolarisation that was initiated in the early 1990s.

The decade that commenced with the economic crash in 2008 stands out in terms of its nature, drama and impact in such a way that it seems a natural chronological period to examine the politics of a nation. The focus on this decade is also a natural follow-on from two earlier volumes devoted to the analysis of Italian politics in the two decades prior to the crash, 1987-1997 and 1997-2007 (Bull & Rhodes 1997a; Bull& Rhodes 2007a). The current volume therefore extends the analysis to cover in total roughly thirty years of Italian politics. The decade commencing with the great crash was a critical period, if only because several changes occurred in Italian politics that would have been almost impossible to foresee on the eve of the crisis. Who would have predicted, in 2007, that within a few years, Italy would be

at the eye of a eurozone storm that President Obama said was 'scaring the world'? Who would have predicted in 2007 that, within ten years, all the mainstream political parties but one would be advocating leaving the Euro? Who would have predicted in 2007 that, within six years, Italy would be in a political crisis without a government, Prime Minister or President? Who would have predicted in 2007 – a mere one year after the decisive rejection of the centre-right's constitutional reform project in referendum – that within a decade Italians would have rejected an analogous constitutional reform project from the centre-left? Who would have predicted in 2007 that within six years what was little more than an internet blog would be the political party with the largest percentage of the vote in Italy? And, finally, who would have predicted in 2007 that, within ten years, the bipolarisation of the party and political system which so many observers had assumed would continue to consolidate itself, would have effectively run its course?

Of course, it is also true that no chronological period, however significant, can be seen independently from the years that preceded it, and in this case a full understanding of the politics of Italy during 2007-2017 is not possible without some knowledge of the preceding years. Indeed, a close examination of the Italian case suggests that many of the changes that occurred during the decade of the economic recession had their roots in the political and economic upheaval of a much earlier period: the early 1990s. This is evident in many of the analyses contained in this volume, where there are frequent reference points to the early 1990s as a significant, if not main, turning point in Italian post-war politics. Yet, the sheer impact of the 2011-13 crisis should not be underestimated. Indeed, as will be argued below, it could be viewed as being as momentous and significant to Italy's general trajectory of change as the years 1992-94. It will be argued that, beyond the nuances and complexities of the changes in Italian politics during 2007-2017, an broad thematic change also stands out in relation to the long-term trajectory of the Italian polity: the apparent exhaustion of the

bipolarisation and majoritarian 'mission' which the political class putatively embarked upon in the early 1990s. Of course, it could be argued that bipolarism was never a shared 'mission', as such, of the Italian political establishment. Yet, what is undeniable is that this apparent quest, and the language surrounding it, dominated Italian politics, party strategies and the party system over a 25 year period, as well as shaping institutional, constitutional and electoral reforms (and failed reforms). The notion that Italian democracy was in transition was premised on the widely-held idea that a better functioning democracy required a bipolarisation of the party system to produce a more majoritarian form of democracy and real alternation in government (which had been effectively missing in the previous fifty year period). By the end of a decade of crisis and recession, this central idea appears to have been fatally undermined through various developments which are documented in this volume and summarized briefly below. In that sense also, the politics of the decade of economic recession in Italy were influenced by a distinctive mix of factors: those rooted in a long-term trajectory of change prompted by the 'collapse' of the old parties and party system in the early 1990s; and political and economic factors which were new (or made new) as a consequence of the dramatic impact of the eurozone crisis which started in 2008.

Economic, social and cultural change in the shadow of austerity

The Italian economy and the eurozone crisis, of course, provide the backdrop to the decade's politics but are also a key example of the importance of historical context, so it is perhaps natural that the volume should start with this (Bull 2018). On the face of it, the irruption of the eurozone crisis appears to be a classic example of an unexpected 'disruptive' element in the development of the Italian economy and an element that has had long-term economic (and political) effects. Yet, the Italian economy has suffered more severe and longer-term effects than most other eurozone economies and the question is why. This

question, as Bull (2018) argues, is especially pertinent in view of the consensus that had developed pre-crash (and notably in the mid-late 1990s) that the Italian economy had turned a corner under the emergence of a new 'culture of stability' based on sound finance and new political and economic elites. That literature is largely forgotten now, but an analysis of the Italian economy preceding the 2008 crisis is able to place the 'disruptive' interpretation of the eurozone crisis in clearer context, for even if the cause of the eurozone crisis was one of contagion, the level of impact was shaped by national situations; and, in terms of public indebtedness and competitiveness, the Italian economy was, by 2007, in a very poor position to withstand easily the impact of a crisis of that magnitude. The eurozone crisis, in other words, may not have been the direct cause of the deep, structural problems that the Italian economy has experienced in the decade of crisis, but it certainly exposed and exacerbated them.

The consequence of the constraints placed on the Italian economy and finances after being effectively 'policed' by the EU in 2011 was not, of course, all negative. On the contrary, austerity often prompts reform (see, for example, Sacchi 2018 on welfare), and, after years of struggle and slippage on the public deficit in the 2000s, this was (as in the 1990s), reined in during the years of the crisis. While this had a visible impact on the public deficit, it only resulted in a slowing of the rate of rise in the overall public debt. It probably also impacted negatively on Italy's growth problem, and it almost certainly contributed to the Italians' falling out with Europe. Indeed, the EU-Italy relationship has undergone a gradual (some would say subtle, others dramatic) shift in the course of the decade. The notion of the *vincolo esterno* ('external constraint'), so important to the narrative and achievements of the 1990s in entering the single currency, was based not just on the idea that Italy needed Europe's help (or discipline) to enact reforms which otherwise would not materialise through its own political class, but also on a more generic idea that the European road would lead to

many positive outcomes and to an overall improvement of the socio-economic system. The effective imposition of 'EU austerity' and its effects which started under the government of Mario Monti has gradually undermined that perception. As a former European Commissioner himself, and out of his own deep convictions, Monti may have seen himself in the same mould as Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, former Governor of the Bank of Italy (1979-1993), Prime Minister (1993-1994), and President of the Republic (1999-2006), popularly seen as the 'saviour' of Italy's European credentials through his actions in the mid-1990s to get Italy into the euro. Monti's government's actions, however, set in train a subtle 'change in mood' of Italians towards the European Union, which has been reflected both at the level of government - characterised by a much more challenging approach to EU policies notably under the Renzi government in 2014-16 - and in growing scepticism about the EU amongst Italians, in which the rising euroscepticism of several of the mainstream parties has played a key role (Bull 2018).

There has been a clear social dimension to this decade of crisis, even if its contours might not be precisely as might have been anticipated. Protests against globalisation and austerity were widespread across Europe, and Italy was no exception to the trend. Indeed, it was not surprising in view of Italy's experience of the early 2000s, when the anti-liberalisation/globalisation social protest movements were amongst the most prominent in Europe. Yet, Andretta (2018) finds a very different composition to the movements in the two periods. While those of the early 2000s were strong and characterised by 'a network of different social movement traditions and organisations' (activists of traditional leftist parties and trade unions, groups with a Catholic background, radical activists from the social centres and 'new' post-materialist social movements), those prompted by the eurozone crisis were relatively weak, divided and dominated by the traditional actors, failing therefore to replicate the social and political coalitions of the previous period. Consequently, Andretta argues,

while in other European countries the changes in the party and political system during the years of crisis were evidently influenced by the broad anti-austerity coalitional movements, this was not the case in Italy, where, despite the Five Star Movement's exploitation of economic grievances (as well as its criticism of the dishonesty and indecisiveness of the political class) there was no link between the party and anti-austerity protest mobilisation. If anything, it was the other way round since Italian party strategies and alliances tended to condition or influence the mobilisation against austerity and specifically the trade unions' role in it. Perhaps ironically, that role was strengthened further under PD-led governments since they were perceived to be implementing neoliberal policies combined with aggressive anti-union policies (especially under Renzi).

This fits with the more general analysis of the impact of the crisis on the role of trade unions by Regalia and Regini (2018), who argue that the impact of a prolonged recession did not take the anticipated form of a further relentless advancement of the neo-liberal agenda through a weakening of the social and political influence of trade unions, national collective bargaining and social dialogue. While, it is true, this had characterised the decade before the crisis, there was no acceleration of these trends after 2008, and if anything they witnessed a reversal. The authors argue that trade unions displayed unexpected resilience in terms of organisation and influence, reinforcing their traditional roles in some areas and reinventing their role and repertoire of activities in others, points overlooked by some industrial relations analysts. The authors explain these developments in terms of, on the one hand, a broadening presence of the trade unions in other spheres of Italian public life (besides the production process) making it more difficult for governments to challenge them, and, on the other, continuing fragmentation and low capacity for coordination amongst Italian employers along with weak and short-lived governments, leading to inconsistency and change in the approaches to the trade unions.

The crisis has also wrought significant changes in the social fabric of the country, reflected in increases in poverty and the growth of inequality under the influence of neo-liberal policies. Catanzaro (2018) outlines the impact of these on social capital, particularly as far as trust in politics and in institutions is concerned. Catanzaro argues that the established correlation between rises in inequality and a decrease in trust in institutions is not automatic: 'institutions, parties and political leaders are among the main actors who can combat this trend or allow it to grow.' Traditionally, regional political sub-cultures in Italy (the Catholic and socialist-communist) had helped to create social capital, reducing inequalities and fostering economic development, but this entered a process of decline in the 1980s and effective collapse in the 1990s. The negative trend in social capital after 2007 damaged the relevance of political sub-cultures, further resulting in a significant decline in citizens' trust in politics and institutions, and notably in political parties, and a rise in feelings of alienation.

As Catanzaro argues, this has also been due to the rise of new types of political parties (business firm, personalistic, populist etc.), the implications of which, for politics and culture, are analysed in more depth by Pasquino (2018). The long-term decline of traditional political cultures has resulted in their effective replacement with political 'narratives' usually tied to the figure of a leader. These narratives may have the capacity to secure visibility and possibly power but not to structure viable and stable political organisations. In other words, as Pasquino (2018) argues, there are significant cultural problems at the root of Italy's politics and party system: 'the disappearance of the *Weltanschauungen*, of the frameworks for interpreting and understanding reality, of the formulation of grounded solutions and a commitment to their implementation.' This deep change, it could be argued, lies at the heart of some of the more visible aspects of the political crisis today.

Political and party system change: bipolarisation arrested

The eurozone (economic) crisis heightened the sense of *political* crisis in Italy, especially from Autumn 2011 when contagion reached Italian shores leading, within a few months, to the downfall of the Berlusconi government – and with it, the ending of a long period of political dominance of the centre-right, which subsequently entered a decade of turmoil and division (Tarchi 2017). The reversion to non-partisan (often, in the literature, called 'technical') government through the appointment of Mario Monti as Prime Minister in 2011 was reminiscent of the Ciampi and Dini governments in the 1990s, indicating the incapacity of the party system to produce stable party government (Pasquino & Valbruzzi 2015), a failure which had long-term roots in the meltdown of the party system between 1992 and 1994, and the failure to re-stabilise and re-consolidate a new party system since then. The (apparent) *leit motiv* from the 1990s onwards was a quest for bipolarisation of the party system as a means of overcoming Italy democracy's long-term anomaly: the absence of alternation in government. Bipolarisation was also expected to produce greater stability, primarily through a more 'majoritarian' (rather than 'consensual') operation of the political system. Yet, despite bipolarisation and alternation being achieved in the 1990s, the stability that was supposed to accompany it proved more elusive, at least in the long-term. Indeed, part of the problem was the degree of instability in the bipolarism that developed. Fundamental to the success of the bipolarisation project were not just institutional and electoral reforms (see below) but also the capacity of the main political forces on the centre-left and centre-right to defragment their political areas and produce coherent political visions and stable social bases. Yet, both sides of the political spectrum have proved wanting in this regard. Their shortcomings, in a context of economic crisis, have resulted in the intrusion of a significant third actor, reshaping the party system in a direction that has made the problem of party government even more intractable.

On the centre-right, Forza Italia (and its successor 'People of Liberty') and the electoral coalition built around it, had provided the foundation for the reconstruction of the party system after its meltdown in 1992-94, and a building block for bipolarisation. In 2008, furthermore, following a decisive electoral victory and with Berlusconi in office, it looked set to continue in this role. Yet, the devastating impact of the economic crisis on the Berlusconi government and its almost enforced removal from office under European, international and national pressures, led to a trail of internal dissension, fragmentation and break up, resulting in new parties and parliamentary groupings. Tarchi (2018) charts this disintegration into factions (both in and beyond the main party of the centre-right), explaining it in terms of the strategic dilemmas and choices, the personalisation and disputes over leadership, the failed institutionalisation of the party, the persistence of legal and corruption problems, and the broader programmatic failure of Berlusconi's 'liberal revolution' of 1994 both in terms of government action and as a vehicle to inspire the other parties of the centre-right (the Northern League and National Alliance and its successors). As Tarchi argues, the centre-right has, in the course of the decade, managed to transform itself from an essential pivot and builder of a bipolarised party system into a key instrument of destabilisation of that system.

On the centre-left, the Democratic Party (PD) was born in 2007 on the cusp of the economic crisis in an attempt to arrest the decline of the Democratic Party of the Left and the Margherita (or 'Daisy'). Analogous to Forza Italia on the right, it set out with a 'majoritarian vocation', bringing together into one party two progressive strands—Catholic and Communist—of Italian politics which had provided the heart of the Olive Tree Coalition (*Ulivo*). Yet, the two parties representing these traditions proved not so easy to merge into a single party. As Ventura (2018) argues, the genesis and founding period through two leaderships (Veltroni and Bersani) had a significant impact on the nature of the party, with its essential features, strategies and internal life still being dominated by decisions made in the

pre-2007 period. These factors, combined with changing contextual (electoral reform) and external (economic and governmental crisis) environments undermined the institutionalisation of the party and its ability to provide a clear cultural and political profile to advance its so-called 'majoritarian vocation'.

The election of Renzi to the leadership of the party appeared at first to be capable of turning this situation around through dynamic leadership based on wide-ranging support from within the party, something which was reinforced by the PD's resounding electoral success in the 2014 European elections. However, over time, it became apparent that his impact was not just more limited than expected, but posed new challenges and problems for the party and its mission. Despite the support of the members, Renzi's more 'liberal' stance alienated the traditional left of the party (eventually producing a schism), with the party divided over almost everything from policy to electoral reform. Renzi was understandably much more focused on his role as Prime Minister than party leader, with a lack of attention to the party's ambiguities and dilemmas concerning its organisational structure and cultural positioning. Finally, Renzi tied the 'majoritarian vocation' very much to the achievement of a root-and-branch, majoritarian-oriented constitutional and electoral reform (see below) which dominated his agenda and on which he staked his entire political career/future (by indicating that he would resign if the reform which he had got approved by parliament were to be rejected in a referendum). With the popular vote against the reform, Renzi did not leave political life as promised. However, he had to resign as prime minister and party leader. Nevertheless he influenced the choice of his successor as prime minister (Paolo Gentiloni) and launched an aggressive campaign to be re-elected leader of the Democratic Party, which he achieved in April 2017 albeit with fewer votes than in December 2013.

If the two principal parties on which the bipolarisation of the party system had been predicated a decade earlier have faltered during the crisis, the final factor which has also

contributed to arresting that development was the rapid emergence of a new political party, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement. As Tronconi (2018) argues, the impact on the party system of this political movement, which 'represents probably the most important innovation in Italian politics probably since Berlusconi's launch of Forza Italia in 1994', can hardly be overestimated. Founded only in 2005 as a blog, by the 2013 national elections it was the party with the largest percentage of the popular vote, with 163 MPs (109 in the Chamber and 54 in the Senate), plus 17 European MPs in 2014, in addition to regional councillors and mayors across the peninsula. Its success has reshaped the Italian party system into a tripolar configuration; its firm refusal to participate in any governing coalitions has caused instability in the Italian party system and a failure of party government; its anti-establishment appeal and its innovatory organisation (or lack of) and communication techniques, has created confusion amongst the other parties which are having to re-think their own.

Arguably, the M5S is an Italian variant of a more general 'populist, anti-establishment wave' across Europe and beyond, stimulated by the impact of the economic crisis (especially on lower social groups) and the identification of globalisation as chief cause, as well as by the unpopularity of the mainstream parties and their traditional ways. In that sense, the future direction of the party remains uncertain. Like its counterparts elsewhere, the M5S's very expansion has already, in a short space of time, led to organisational and strategic dilemmas which have made acute the tensions that can arise in an anti-establishment party wielding power and authority (Tronconi 2018). And it is likely that the further its institutionalisation develops the more acute those dilemmas will become. Nevertheless, in spite of these problems, the M5S has carved out a position in Italian politics from which it will not be easily dislodged. Moreover, when combined with the difficulties on the centre-right and centre-left, its impact on Italian politics has been profound, as we witness the evaporation of

the long-standing consensus on bipolarism and the emergence of trends towards the old, more secure and proportional ways of Italian politics.

Institutional stasis and reform

If the appointment of the Monti government, following the collapse of the Berlusconi government in November 2011, represented the failure of the party system (to produce party government), the February 2013 national elections not only failed to reassert the party system's authority, but brought the crisis of party government to a head. The elections, combined with the subsequent turmoil for the election of a new President of the Republic produced a 'perfect storm' (Bull 2016), leaving Italy, not for the first time, without government, prime minister and president. The outcome was a temporary fix achieved through first, the re-election of President Napolitano, and second, his appointment of Enrico Letta (of the PD) to lead a grand coalition government Italian-style that was fully and visibly supported by the President of the Republic.

In doing this, Napolitano exploited the crisis to exert his full political and moral authority by delivering, in his acceptance speech, a devastating indictment of the political parties and their behaviour over many years. This indictment was primarily based on their failure to achieve institutional reform and to address the democratic anomalies in the 2005 electoral system which had been identified by the Constitutional Court. It was in this way that an issue which had been regarded by many observers as a dead letter following the decisive rejection by referendum of Berlusconi's radical constitutional reform proposals in 2006, came back onto the political agenda – and with some force. The Letta government was handed a report from a presidential-appointed group of 'ten wise men' which contained, in broad brush terms, recommendations for institutional reform, which the new prime minister he was expected to act on. He did so—although nothing was completed before he was

effectively forced to resign less than a year later by PD leader Matteo Renzi who replaced him. Renzi, therefore, inherited a commitment and obligation to carry through constitutional reform. At the same time, he willingly embraced it and made it his own. He wanted to increase the decision-making capacity of the political system. The reform he envisaged and eventually got approved by parliament, although quite confused (and accompanied by an electoral reform which was neither plurality or majoritarian) was presented as a means of enhancing the governing capacity of the political system. Therefore it could be seen as favouring a party such as the PD with an apparent 'majoritarian vocation'. The reform fit Renzi's carefully-cultivated image of a politician dedicated to action who was intent on 'scrapping' the old political class and practices. And, according to its supporters at least, if successfully passed, the reform had the chance of meeting those long-term aspirations from the early 1990s of Italy completing a transition to a better-functioning democracy, following multiple attempts and failures over a thirty year period (although for a contrary view see Pasquino & Valbruzzi 2017).

Renzi's enthusiasm for this project, however, proved to be his undoing. The near two year long parliamentary and referendum process produced a multitude of disagreements and divisions (and notably inside the PD itself) as well as a veritable sea change in the nature of the political debate over the reform. At the outset of the process in early 2014, the reform was paraded by Renzi as a fundamental part of his radical programme to 'scrap' the old practices associated with the establishment. His was to be a new way of doing politics. By the time the referendum took place in December 2016, however, the tables had been turned, and the reform was paraded by the M5S and others as an operation by the political 'establishment' to cling on to power - and that a 'No' vote would help consign that political class to history. Both could be interpreted as 'anti-establishment' appeals, and the Italian people chose to reject that of Renzi, leaving him with no choice but to resign. The rejection may also have

consigned constitutional reform to the dustbin of history, or at least that type of overarching reform designed to push the political system in a more 'majoritarian' direction. Had the constitutional reform been achieved, of course, it would have stood out as one of the central political changes of this decade. As it was, the issue monopolised much of the political debate over a four year period but with no material impact on the functioning of the Italian political system. That outcome, and the fact that the issue has been researched in some depth elsewhere (e.g. Fusaro 2017; Bull 2017; Pritoni, Valbruzzi & Vignati 2017) justified excluding it from an in-depth analysis in this volume.

Electoral reform, however, proved to be different. The quest for bipolarisation has been, since the early 1990s, the cause of an obsession of (some of) the political class with tampering with the electoral system. Italian politicians over a 25 year period have clearly believed that the electoral system is one of the key instruments for achieving party political change. Regalia (2018) then focuses on the impact of the 2005 electoral reform (which introduced the so-called *Porcellum*) which was used in 2006 and then in two elections during the decade of crisis (2008 and 2013), and assesses the extent to which (compared with the party system produced in 1994 following the first significant electoral reform) the 2005 electoral reform acted as an engine of party system change during the economic crisis. Regalia shows how the electoral system affected party strategies and coalitional tactics in successive elections. However, analysing the morphology of the party system and the dynamics of competition, she argues that the *Porcellum* produced three very different outcomes in three elections (including political paralysis in the elections of 2013), thus highlighting the unpredictability of what has become an Italian party tradition of attempted political engineering through electoral reform. The 2005 electoral system was superseded by rulings of the Constitutional Court, by a Renzi-inspired electoral reform that never saw the light of day (it was approved but was dependent on his constitutional reform also being

approved) and by the eventual approval, in Autumn 2017, of a new electoral law which is one third plurality two thirds PR. Known as the *Rosatellum* (after the leader of the PD Parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies, Ettore Rosato, in whose name the reform was proposed) it was approved after several votes of confidence, is highly controversial and may not last for long.

Policy change in welfare and migration

To what extent have policies (beyond the general management of the economy noted above) been impacted by the crisis? We have selected two prominent areas as case studies of reform: welfare policy and migration policy.

In the decade prior to the crisis, welfare policy had undergone a period of reform stasis (following the welfare reforms of the 1990s), but after the crisis of 2011 the sector experienced a new wave of reforms, which, contrary to expectation, did not entail simple retrenchment. In a fresh assessment of Italian social policy, Sacchi (2018) argues that the reforms carried through under the Monti and Renzi governments combined liberalisation with expansion of social rights, in what has been described as 'embedding flexibilisation', the author showing the potential of those reforms to disrupt the structure of 'rents' of social actors embodying resistance to changes in the welfare state. Sacchi documents such changes as being the outcome of an interaction between pressures from external forces and the nature of domestic political opportunity structures. As a result, he argues that the Italian welfare state today is more modernised and comprehensive in scope than before the crisis, especially from the perspective of income support, even if there is still lacking any overall strategy of modernisation to deal with the demographic challenges the country faces.

The reason for selecting migration policy is because the response here was shaped not just by the financial crisis but also by a humanitarian crisis prompted by the 'Arab Spring'

and its long-term consequences, which have been especially acute for countries with EU outlying borders such as Italy and Greece. Caponio and Cappiali (2018) analyse the so-called 'structural gap' between Italian restrictive policies and expansive inflows. Following consistent rises in the pre-crisis period, the policies of Italian governments at the height of the financial crisis were successful in curtailing new migrant inflows (assisted partly by a decline in the attractiveness of Italy as a destination in view of the financial crisis itself). But with the onset of the humanitarian crisis in 2011 and the collapse of the system of external controls, the number of undocumented migrants began to increase again accompanied by a significant reconfiguration of inflows (from foreign workers to asylum seekers). The authors' analysis suggests that during the crisis, rather than a 'structural gap', what occurred was more of 'an oscillation between the closure and opening of migration policies, and therefore a reconfiguration of the categories of migrants entering the country that mirrors the loopholes in such policies.' A key role in this oscillation was played by the relationship between national and European political institutions responsible for migration policies. Specifically, during the height of the economic crisis there was a convergence of interests and goals between Italian governments and EU institutions which favoured the enforcement of restrictive policies that were effective in constraining new inflows, but in the context of the humanitarian crisis these agendas clearly started to diverge. While Italian governments preferred to 'turn a blind eye' to avoid politicisation, EU institutions emphasised the introduction of restrictive measures to be implemented – at least in principle – in collaboration with Italian authorities, leaving aside actions aimed at strengthening solidarity in migrants' reception among member states.

Italy's trajectory of change: the end of bipolarism?

In a volume dedicated to the Italy of 20 years ago (Bull and Rhodes 1997a), three competing possible scenarios of broad political change were mapped out (Bull and Rhodes 1997b, pp. 12-13). None were mutually exclusive since they each depended on the intensity and frequency of their occurrence: first, an increasing resort to non-partisan (or technical) governments (implying continuing failure of the party system); second, a veritable transition to a new Republic through constitutional reform (see Pasquino 1997); and third, a gradual 'normalisation' of Italian politics (whatever that might mean). In that decade (1987-1997), there had been two recurrences of non-partisan government (Ciampi and Dini), a major (failed) attempt at achieving a transition to a new Republic (through the *Bicamerale*)*,* and various developments (electoral reform, party system change, alternation in government) which pointed up a possible road to the 'normalisation' of Italian politics.

Ten years later, in a further volume on Italian politics (Bull & Rhodes 2007a), the analysis focused on the subsequent decade (1997-2007) which witnessed no recurrence of technical governments and a further significant (failed) attempt at a transition to a new Republic (through Berlusconi's constitutional reform project) (Bull & Pasquino 2007). At the same time, Bull & Rhodes (2007b, pp. 5-6) unpicked in more detail the notion of 'normalisation'. In the heady times of the mid-late 1990s the notion of the 'normalisation' of Italian politics was something instinctively understood (even if disputed) by most observers of Italian politics because of Italy's categorisation as an 'anomalous democracy'. However, in view of its pejorative and relative sense, and in view of the complexity of change of the 1997-2007 decade (where an overall direction of change was impossible to identify), it was argued that this idea might better be covered by a more generic capturing of political change as developed by authors such as Thelen (2003) and Streeck & Thelen (2005). It was posited that Italy had experienced, in the early 1990s, a 'punctuated equilibrium', where the long-term stabilities of Italy's political system had been subject to a dramatic rupture and

significant change, followed by a post-crisis process of 're-stabilisation' and negotiated change, in which elements of the old persisted with elements of the new. That approach provided a broad framework within which varying levels of change in different sectors could be captured within the covers of an edited volume.

Ten years on again, we may observe that the 2007-2017 decade suffered a further resort to technical government and a further major (failed) attempt to secure a transition to a new Republic (through the Renzi constitutional reform project). In addition, it seems from hindsight that dropping the term 'normalisation' had been sensible, if only because the experiences of political change across the world in the past decade make it difficult to identify what might any longer be considered as 'normal' in democratic politics. More significantly, however, it could be argued that Italy experienced a further 'punctuated equilibrium' in 2011-2013 in the form of the impact of the eurozone crisis. This immense 'rupture', in the context of European and international change, helped set off unanticipated political changes which are still reverberating throughout the political system today, and which are documented in this volume. If we attempt to draw out a common, quintessentially 'political' characteristic of these changes and identify a key feature of the outcome of this decade in relation to the previous two, it is the sense of exhaustion of the bipolarisation project born in the 1990s, and the beginnings of a possible reversal. If one looks at the failure of the majoritarian-inspired constitutional reform in 2016, the replacement of the 2005 electoral system with a more proportional electoral system, the demise over the decade of the two parties regarded as pivotal to the development of bipolarisation, the rise of the M5S, the tripolar reconfiguration of a 'destructured' party system left vulnerable to unpredictable developments, the exhaustion of political cultures and the poor state of social capital, it suggests that the apparent majoritarian 'mission' of the 1990s (which may perhaps have been expected to help 'normalise' Italian democracy in 'normal' times) has not only run its course

but is on the ebb. If the bipolarisation tide *has* turned, the eurozone crisis will, from hindsight, be seen to have had a lasting impact on developments in Italian politics, even if, ironically, some of those developments might be in the form of a return to previous 'stabilities' associated with the former so-called 'anomalous democracy'.

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