

# Italy's comic opera shows no sign of reaching the last act

As a returned exile witnessing at first hand my first election in Italy for 43 years, I am struck by the contrast between the permanence of the country and the fragility of its politics.

My garden in the Roman countryside is dominated by a tall watch-tower dating from AD1000, probably earlier. Just over the hill lies the Via Salaria, one of the great Roman roads. It doesn't take much imagination to hear the tramp of the legions marching towards Rome. There is a sense of eternity that makes even Britain seem *arriviste* by comparison. Quite what the legions would have made of Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi is harder to imagine. Caligula versus Pompey, perhaps? Certainly there is no Augustus on the ballot paper.

The politics seem ephemeral by comparison. It's not that Italians are uninterested. With an extraordinarily high turn-out of more than 83 per cent, much more than the British or American figure, voters certainly want a say. The problem lies with what is on offer. Instead of a clear choice, they were presented with a ballot paper a yard long, with a list of parties ranging from another Mussolini at one extreme to defiantly unreformed communists at the other.

With neither side prepared to campaign on the radical measures needed to extract Italy from its present difficulties, it's no wonder that an unedifying campaign, richer in puerile insults than in policies, produced an unedifying

result: an outcome as close as the Bush vs Gore election in America in 2000, and just as divisive and as likely to be contested – indeed, Berlusconi is already doing just that. The Left has the narrowest of margins in the Lower House and will attempt to govern – Italy will join Cuba and North Korea among the few countries still unreconstructed enough to have communists in government. But the real result of the election is that it has settled nothing.

It didn't have to be that way. If Berlusconi had used his unprecedented five straight years in power to carry through the changes that he originally promised, it could have been very different. The economy, liberated from bureaucratic entanglements and excessive regulation, could have come roaring back from its present depressed state. Italy's standing in Europe and the world would have been boosted. The centre-Right could have made itself the natural party of government. Instead, we have had five years of missed opportunities.

With his promises unkept and so few practical achievements to his credit, Berlusconi could only fall back on clowning and on increasingly wild and uncosted promises to abolish unpopular taxes as the election campaign went on. In the end, Italians, so often dazzled by riches and success, could see that Berlusconi with his turbid past was the problem, not the solution. He should remember Oscar Wilde's remark: no man is rich enough to buy back his past.



Carla Powell

Yet his replacement by the Left offers poor hope of salvation for Italy. The narrow margin of victory increases the likelihood of a return to the revolving-door governments that characterised most of the postwar period. With so many shades of opinion, from trendy pink to the deepest red, represented in the coalition of the Left, and the likelihood of further elections before long, it is only a matter of time before one or other of the parties will walk out of the coalition in simulated dudgeon in the hope of gaining electoral advantage. Last time round, it was the communists and they must be the most likely suspects to defect, in the hope of bolstering their Left-wing support.

There are actually some glimmers of good sense in the Left's manifesto, in particular recognition of the need for more competition in Italy's highly

regulated professions and a commitment to reduce payroll tax in order to create new jobs.

But words are cheap, especially when they are so often devalued. The good parts are balanced by promises to repeal the law that permits temporary contracts of employment, thus pre-empting the sort of confrontation before which Jacques Chirac and Dominique de Villepin have just surrendered in France.

Privatisation is abandoned in deference to the communists. It is anyway scarcely credible that a government that includes the communists will stand by free-market policies when it comes to a crunch. Italy's communists are not the enlightened Chinese version: they are the hard Left.

With such built-in contradictions, the new government is no more likely to push through fundamental reforms – reduction of bureaucracy, control of immigration, cuts in public spending – than was Berlusconi when it came to the point. The outlook is continuing economic stagnation and unemployment.

To make it worse, Italy will lose the benefits of Berlusconi's robust performance as an alliance partner to America and Britain in Iraq, which led to the country being taken more seriously on the world stage, thanks especially to the brave part played by the country's underfunded armed forces and carabinieri. And Berlusconi's growing scepticism about the direction of Europe will be replaced by craven attachment

to everything that emanates from the European Commission in Brussels, Prodi's spiritual home.

What lies ahead? Most likely a brief period of irresolute government, followed by fresh elections. But these will produce something better only if Berlusconi leaves the stage and hands over leadership of the centre-Right to the able and more politically astute Gianfranco Fini, until now foreign minister and Berlusconi's deputy. He has the steel to implement change.

Another possibility is that both coalitions will dissolve, with elements of both regrouping in the centre. Probably the best outcome, if hardly an ambitious one, is that Italy will fall back on a government of non-political experts, most likely led by the governor of the Bank of Italy, Mario Draghi. Such governments have often in the past proved more capable of carrying through essential reforms than their political counterparts.

Italy's voters are still too cushioned against the scale and severity of the country's problems to accept the sacrifices that they will eventually have to make. Britain's voters in 1979 didn't embrace Margaret Thatcher's harsh medicine with any enthusiasm. But they knew there was no alternative. Italians have so far been dosed only with placebos. Perhaps the country can fool itself for a while longer: sadly, to paraphrase Dante, *la commedia non è finita*.

Simon Heffer is away