

ITALY

Short cuts, strong men, quick fixes

Carla Powell

I often think Italy would get on better without a government at all. Those who govern fiddle things to promote their own interests, while the governed spend their time seeking ingenious ways to protect themselves from official interference.

Unfortunately that rather fanciful notion does not work when the country faces problems as serious as Italy does now: no growth for a decade, a shattering level of youth unemployment and a deep moral crisis. These are not difficulties that will be resolved by benign neglect; they need political solutions that command the democratic support of voters.

If you look back over Italy's history, you find that the voters have two characteristics: first,

they crave a strong figure who will miraculously solve the country's problems. Second, even more than voters in other countries, they naively believe the promises politicians make, actually expecting them to deliver on those promises even though all history and experience shows that they don't and can't.

The best modern example of both these tendencies is Silvio Berlusconi. When he first came into politics he presented himself as the successful businessman who would be able to solve Italy's problems, using the techniques that created his television empire, and sideline all the useless politicians. He invited people to have faith in him and his ability to transfer his business success into a strong political leadership that they wanted. Naively, Italian voters believed him then, and believed him again in the February elections, even though the experience of the past decade is that he delivered solutions to his personal

problems and interests only, not to national problems. It seems that the credulousness of some 30 per cent of Italian voters is infinite.

Yet it is not just Berlusconi. If you go further back into Italy's political history, you can easily find examples of other charismatic figures who promised salvation and in the end delivered little or nothing.

Some people are comparing the new phenomenon of Italian politics, Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement, the so-called *grillini*, to Mussolini. It's true that he does have the ability to bewitch nearly a quarter of voters with his exaggerated rhetoric that pours out in a non-stop stream. But there is a big difference. Grillo doesn't stand for anything but only *against* everything. He wants to get rid of the existing political class which has failed and that appeals to the frustration all Italians feel as the country's problems get worse. But unlike Mussolini, or even Berlusconi, he offers no solutions, nor a willingness to take responsibility for resolving Italy's problems. In other words, Grillo is an entirely negative phenomenon.

The voters are right in one sense at least: Italy needs something and someone new. The elections failed to promote that and we face another period when the same old faces will be trying to build coalitions that cannot last, between parties that want to evade our problems rather than address them. It looks inevitable that we shall have to have new elections within a year. Will that lead to the emergence of a strong new leader? Not another Mussolini or, God help us, Berlusconi, but someone who brings a fresh face and fresh ideas.

There are younger leaders around, such as the mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who unsuccessfully challenged Pier Luigi Bersani for the leadership of the centre-left Democratic Party last year. He may not have all the answers but he could bring hope to the country. It won't be by making promises

that can't be delivered. But a Renzi could offer a break with the past – if only Italians can be convinced that there are no painless solutions that can be conjured up by charismatic figures, only a period of blood, toil, sweat and tears, as a great British statesman offered his country in the face of crisis.

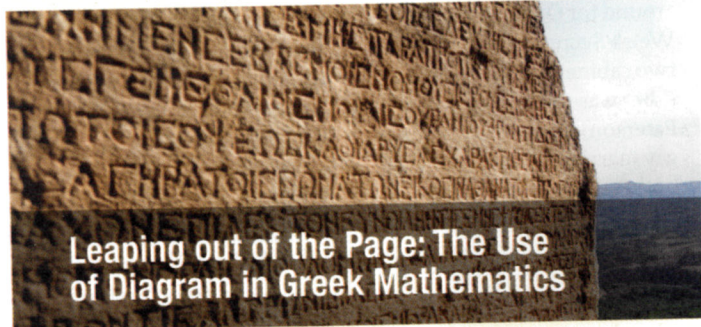
In the end it will come down to the unspoken underlying question in Italy's travails: is Europe worth the sacrifice? It has been an article of faith in Italy that salvation lies in Europe, both salvation for the economy and better government than our own politicians can provide. For a long time this was a one-way street. Membership of the European Union seemed to bring automatic prosperity, enabling Italy to duck hard choices about its own competitiveness. Before the single currency the lira could devalue at will. After the arrival of the euro, we could rely on low interest rates. In both scenarios, reforms could be postponed indefinitely and Italy could convince itself it was up there with the big boys of Europe, France and Germany.

Now Italy has been presented with the bill and does not want to pay. Staying in the euro is possible only with an extended period of pain and sacrifice, on which Mario Monti, to his credit, embarked the country. Avoiding pain, which is what most Italians voted for, requires a return to the freedom to devalue that can only be found outside the euro. Yet that would destroy one of the few fundamental beliefs that unites all Italians, that the EU is an unmitigated blessing for their country that stops Italy from sliding into obscurity.

It's an existential question but one that no one dares to address. The risk is that unless Italians make their choice and stick to it, others will make the choice for them by declining to underwrite indefinitely a country that simply cannot decide. ●
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