

The shock is that Italy's elections really matter

Carla Powell says that Berlusconi's real crime is his failure to turn Italy into a modern state — and that the likely outcome of this electoral contest will be further political decay

Rome
Not long ago I took one of my grandsons to the Colosseum. There were centurions and chariots on view but my grandson was unimpressed. 'Where are the Christians and the lions?' he asked disappointedly.

I feel a bit like that about the Italian elections. It's the first time I have been home in Italy for a general election since reaching voting age — which, for the impatient among you, is rather a long time ago. I hoped for a bit of brio, a few bold ideas, perhaps even the glimpse of a budding Italian Antonio Blairus and Davide Cameronio. Instead the campaign has been drab and ponderous, with the television debate between Berlusconi and Prodi having all the flair and excitement of a municipal council on a wet Wednesday. Definitely no Christians or lions.

But something drastic *has* changed in Italy. Governments and elections never used to matter. Now they do. In the heady, carefree days of the 1960s, Italy was on a roll. Our family firms were turning out the world's finest shoes, textiles and leather goods. Our famously flexible lira made our exports competitive and indeed world-beating. And we paid not a blind bit of notice to our governments. We got on very nicely without them. We voted in large numbers. But we did it in the spirit of the *contrade* of Siena supporting their favourite jockeys in the Palio. We did not vote for programmes or policies, but because politicians could do us useful favours. Everything could be 'arranged'.

Governments came and went, sometimes several in a year, and ministerial backsides rarely rested long enough on their seats to leave an imprint. We even had that wonderful invention the seaside government — *governo balneare* — a caretaker government cobbled together so that the politicians could push off on holiday for a few weeks in August.

Beneath the surface, parts of the Italian state functioned better than they are given credit for. The police and security services cracked the Red Brigades before their colleagues in other European countries dealt with their home-grown terrorists. Italian diplomats bluffed Italy on to the top table of economic summits. The Bank of Italy was a model of probity. But politics equated to comic opera and politicians to clowns. We became fervent Europeans and looked eagerly to Brussels because anything seemed better than being governed by Rome.

What has changed? The answer is globalisation and the challenge from emerging Asia has drastically undermined Italy's competitiveness and terminated its economic miracle. And the economy is further hobbled by the straitjacket of the euro and the myriad regulations which flow from Brussels.

In the new situation a dramatic reshaping of Italy is required. It can only be carried out by an effective government. It has to be capable of reforming institutions, above all the hopelessly slow-moving legal system, and of cutting back the exaggerated benefits (pensions, unemployment benefits, privileges of all sorts) which Italians are paying themselves. So we are in the

unusual position wherein the results of an election really matter.

Sadly, what is on offer to the voters does not measure up to the challenge. Enough has been written about the 'eccentricities' (I have to keep within the libel laws) of Signor Berlusconi, who is conflict-of-interest personified — though that seems not to be a concept that much worries Italian voters. The real charge against him is that he promised to take the measures needed to bail out Italy and turn it into a modern state but has blatantly failed to do so. The unprecedented five years during which his government has been in office — the longest since the second world war — has been time wasted. Put another way, the time has been spent ensuring that he does not have to do 'time' for his alleged misdemeanours. To his credit is the brave decision to send Italian forces to Iraq alongside the US and Britain. That apart, the cupboard has been bare and Italy's reputation abroad has been besmirched.

Yet the coalition of the Left offers no way out of Italy's difficulties. Its leader, Signor Prodi, is a byword for prolixity, and the 300-page election manifesto makes the European constitution look a model of clarity. It's hard to see decisive government emerging from such a ragtag barmy-army of no fewer than 11 parties, even though they include some impressively bright younger politicians like Francesco Rutelli, the former mayor of Rome, and Walter Veltroni, his successor. They are matched on the government side only by Gianfranco Fini, the deputy prime minister.

Part of the problem is the lack of challenge in the Italian political process. The media are gagged by privacy laws and cronyism. Questioning of party leaders on television makes your avuncular Sir David Frost resemble a Spanish Inquisitor. There is no Italian Jeremy Paxman or John Humphrys to put the politicians on the spot. 'Let me ask you again, Mr Berlusconi: when you compare yourself to Jesus Christ are you suggesting that all your business dealings have been immaculately conceived? Yes or no?'

I have no idea what the result will be. Berlusconi still lags in the polls but his 'I'm a Celebrity — Let Me Stay Here' campaign may appeal just enough to give him a further term. Prodi, for his part, has had a John Smith moment of admitting he plans to raise taxes, which may sink him.

What I do know is that neither outcome will provide an adequate answer to Italy's problems. One seasoned observer whom I know says that the only cure for Italy is a quick death, so that the pieces can be picked up equally quickly and a modern state constructed. Sadly, the more likely outcome of these elections is a slow death. It's often said that people get the government they deserve. But as the world's most creative, ingenious, warm and fundamentally decent people, Italians deserve a lot better than they are about to get.

