

Bad guys return as Italy lies in a coma

In Britain you have pantomime at Christmas. We have it in Italy, too, only we call it politics. All the characters are there: Silvio Berlusconi as Widow Twankey, the socialist leader Pier Luigi Bersani as the Ugly Sister, Matteo Renzi, the Bambi-like young mayor of Florence as Prince Charming, and Beppe Grillo, a professional comedian — you could not invent it — leading the opinion polls until recently, plus an assortment of other improbable cartoon characters who would put Westminster's finest in the shade. And that's even after the cabinet photograph with the Queen. It would be hilarious if it were not so sad.

As an interim, Mario Monti, the unelected prime minister who remains caretaker after resigning before Christmas, has done his best. He has taken the first steps to set the country on the path to economic recovery. He has carried through some modest measures to reform the pension system and loosen the worst of Italy's restrictive practices. He has restored the country's image in Europe after Berlusconi made us a laughing stock.

Monti, however, was able to govern only because of a political ceasefire. Given

how dire Italy's situation had become, parties reluctantly agreed to support austerity policies and other reforms although only in a watered-down form. With the worst apparently over for the economy, they are now slavering their hands back on power and patriotism. Characteristically it was Berlusconi who pulled the rug from under Monti's parliament, precipitating elections in February.

Monti has so far declined to participate in the election campaigns or endorse any political party but on Friday he would be willing to lead a coalition government and let the small centrist party campaign under his banner.

Some see this Colombeylese-Eglises tactic, modelled on Genevieve Gaulle staying at home to await the nation's call, as a smart not to say a villainian move. It might just work if it which is likely to emerge from the negotiations as the largest party, fails to achieve a majority in the Senate, creating a deadlock and opening the way for Monti to come back as head of a centrist coalition. Italians, however, are nothing if not fickle. They have already had enough

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austerity. The good opinion of Monti held by Europe's elite will not count for much with the voters, indeed it may be a handicap: Berlusconi is already monsterring him as a glove-puppet for Angela Merkel and Monti's own fastidious personality makes him more suited to the upper ranks of the European Commission than Italy's grubby politics. He will probably emerge in an honorary role as president of Italy.

So we are back with that rule of thumb in Italian politics that things are never so bad that they can't get worse. Nothing suggests that the political parties have learnt lessons from their abject performance in the past. The astounding perks and privileges of the political caste remain almost unchanged, with Italy's parliament costing more than those of Britain, France, Germany and Austria combined. And the parties' resistance to the far-reaching social and economic reforms needed if Italy is to recover from its deep crisis is undiminished.

On the left the old guard of communists and socialists has coalesced to kill off the leadership bid of Renzi, the brightest hope for Italian politics in decades. Where Britain's Labour party in 1994 recognised

the need to modernise its policies and public image from top to bottom by handing the leadership to a charismatic Tony Blair, the Italian left has gone in precisely the opposite direction. It has turned its back on Renzi, whose political appeal extended well beyond the traditional left, and resurrected instead Bersani, a glum retreat from numerous earlier governments.

On the right, just when Italians thought Berlusconi had finally left the stage, he has resurrected himself and announced that he alone can save Italy. It is more likely that his motive is to restore his personal parliamentary immunity after his conviction in October for tax fraud (which he is now appealing) and the impending verdict in his trial for allegedly paying for sex with an underage prostitute. It seems that in Italian politics you can't keep a bad man down.

It's not easy to understand why Italians docilely turn their backs on the future by looking once again to political parties that have brought such discredit on their country in the past. Some are trying to fight back: Berlusconi's own former minister for youth has been demonstrating outside his home with a placard reading

"Enough of dinosaurs! Give us space". But she is a lone voice.

In Italy the young find their way blocked by the old guard in every direction: frozen out of jobs by Europe's most restrictive labour practices, denied promotions in academia by professors too busy making money to attend to teaching and excluded from an influential role in politics by an increasingly senile party system.

Blair or David Cameron, in the Italian system, would still be waiting their turn for a decade or two yet. As a result, the young emigrate in their tens of thousands and it is the best who leave, depriving Italy of their energy and talents and benefiting their favoured destination, Britain.

This is the true tragedy of Italy which has been brilliantly illustrated in a new film, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, produced by Bill Emmott, former editor of *The Economist*, and directed by Annalisa Piras. It contrasts the Bad Italy, of corrupt politicians with mafia links and media monopolies that brainwash the nation by glorifying mediocrity, and the Good Italy that is creative, generous-spirited and patriotic but anaesthetised into a coma.