

Crisis in Italy: Official politics in the west ignores public opinion at will

Tuesday 27 February 2007, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 27 February 2007).

The government crisis in Italy over US bases and Afghanistan reflects the increasing gap in Europe between rulers and ruled.

The states of western Europe continue to resist harmonisation. On the same day last week that the chicaneries of every antiquated careerist vying for the New Labour deputy leadership were made public, each justifying his or her grotesque decision to support the war and occupation of Iraq, the centre-left Italian government - not yet a year old - fell after a debate on foreign policy in the upper chamber.

It was not Iraq that was at issue here. Unlike New Labour (protected by undemocratic electoral laws and MPs unmoved by the suffering in Iraq), all of the Italian left and 80% of the population opposed that war. The dispute concerned two issues: Operation Enduring Freedom - the satirical self-description of the Nato occupation of Afghanistan - and the expansion of the US military base in Vicenza in northern Italy.

Two leftwing senators voted against the government in the Italian senate after the prime minister, Romano Prodi, and his foreign minister, Massimo D'Alema, had made the vote an issue of confidence, arguing that Afghanistan was a legal war because it was supported by the UN. Prodi's arguments failed to sway the two dissenting senators. He might still have won, but three of the seven octogenarian life senators abandoned him as well. One was in bed with flu. Giulio Andreotti (a former prime minister and one of the most corrupt) abstained because he was unhappy about gay marriages, and Ferrari designer Sergio Pininfarina, transported to the senate from the airport in a government limo, also abstained, possibly by mistake since he is a rare visitor to the senate.

As a result, a weakened Prodi, prudent spokesman of an immoderate bourgeoisie, resigned. His popularity was already on the wane, as was that of his neoliberal finance minister, Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, whose attempts to increase short-term contracts for workers have also divided the government - indeed, many of its supporters and a few ministers participated in the protests of last November in defence of universal, publicly financed social services.

Could it be that they wanted to be defeated so as to rejig the coalition by attracting a moderate centre-right party to join their

ranks and dumping the Refounded Communists? It's a risky operation, especially as the RC leader, Fausto Bertinotti (drunk with happiness at becoming a dignitary of the state) has kept his principles under heavy wraps.

When Prodi was asked to form a new government last Friday, he insisted all the constituent parties of the centre-left Union should sign up to 12 points, which included neoliberal "reforms" and unconditional support for his foreign policy, but, mysteriously, not gay partnerships. Bertinotti signed without hesitation and instructed his enforcer inside the Refounded Communist party to remove the dissenting senator Franco Turigliatto from the party without further ado (ironically, the same enforcer, Guido Cappelloni, expelled the dissident "Manifesto group" from the old Communist party in 1969).

And all this in the face of endless intrigue against the ruling coalition's policies by elements from Prodi's own centrist political base. Only a week before the crisis erupted, Prodi had explicitly forbidden any member of the cabinet from participation in the mass protest at the extension of the Vicenza base. Now the crisis within the left is out in the open. Sixty-two per cent of Italians and 73% of the government's supporters want to withdraw all Italian troops from Afghanistan. Like centrist politicians elsewhere, Silvio Berlusconi, Prodi and D'Alema are united in ignoring public opinion. Were it not for factional divisions on other issues (especially patronage and corrupt commissions) the opposition would have voted with Prodi.

It would be mistaken to imagine that hostility to US imperial adventures comes only from the left. The positive response to the European parliament's report denouncing 1,245 CIA flights from Europe included figures from the centre-right. Gijs de Vries, the EU's anti-terrorism tsar and, till recently, staunchly pro-Washington, will resign in March because he has "lost faith" in his US partners. Sergio Romano, a leading centre-right figure, publicly declared he was opposed to all US bases on Italian soil. Why? "We know very well that the Americans used their bases in Djibouti to attack al-Qaida in Ethiopia this year ... If they decide to attack Hizbullah, God forbid, they'll be using Italian bases to do it. And we won't be told beforehand. We'll learn the next day. And you become complicit in such things."

Prodi's 12 points notwithstanding, Italian politics remains volatile: Prodi faces a new knife-edge confidence vote tomorrow and another vote on Afghanistan next month if he survives that. Grandees of the centre-left and centre-right exude the stench of putrefaction.

Nor is this just an Italian disease. The fact that the leaders of the Refounded Communist party cave in to the Washington consensus in return for government posts reflects a far wider problem. Increasingly, official politics in the west ignores public opinion at will. Britain is a striking example. Mass hostility to Blair's wars and the replacement of Trident barely finds an echo in parliament. The BBC had to be neutered and only 12 Labour MPs managed to vote for an inquiry

into British involvement in Iraq. It is the increasing distance between rulers and ruled that threatens the functioning of democracy and leads to desperation.

P.S.

* From the Guardian:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,2022277,00.html>

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