



KEELE  
UNIVERSITY

# The Italian General Election of May 2001\*

JAMES L. NEWELL AND MARTIN J. BULL

Keele European Parties Research Unit  
(KEPRU)

Working Paper 4

---

© JAMES L. NEWELL AND MARTIN J. BULL, 2001

ISSN 1475-1569  
ISBN 1-899488-19-7

KEPRU Working Papers are published by:

School of Politics, International Relations and the Environment (SPIRE)  
Keele University  
Staffs  
ST5 5BG, UK

tel +44 (0)1782 58 4177/3088/3452  
fax +44 (0)1782 58 3592  
[www.keele.ac.uk/depts/spire/](http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/spire/)

Editor: Professor Thomas Poguntke ([t.poguntke@keele.ac.uk](mailto:t.poguntke@keele.ac.uk))

KEPRU Working Papers are available via SPIRE's website.

---

Launched in September 2000, the Keele European Parties Research Unit (KEPRU) was the first research grouping of its kind in the UK. It brings together the hitherto largely independent work of Keele researchers focusing on European political parties, and aims:

- to facilitate its members' engagement in high-quality academic research, individually, collectively in the Unit and in collaboration with cognate research groups and individuals in the UK and abroad;
- to hold regular conferences, workshops, seminars and guest lectures on topics related to European political parties;
- to publish a series of parties-related research papers by scholars from Keele and elsewhere;
- to expand postgraduate training in the study of political parties, principally through Keele's MA in Parties and Elections and the multinational PhD summer school, with which its members are closely involved;
- to constitute a source of expertise on European parties and party politics for media and other interests.

The Unit shares the broader aims of the Keele European Research Centre, of which it is a part. KERC comprises staff and postgraduates at Keele who are actively conducting research into the politics of remaking and integrating Europe.

Convenor KEPRU: Dr Kurt Richard Luther ([r.luther@keele.ac.uk](mailto:r.luther@keele.ac.uk))

---

James L. Newell is senior lecturer in politics and Martin J. Bull is professor of politics, both at Salford University.

## The Italian General Election of May 2001\*

The Italian General Election of 13 May 2001 constituted, in conjunction with the elections of 1992, 1994 and 1996, a further milestone in Italian politics. The election witnessed the removal of the left from office for the first time in Italian history, and alternation in government between a centre-left and centre-right coalition, thus (after the previous elections) completing a cycle of alternation between competing coalitions which had been absent in fifty years of the Italian Republic. They also confirmed the trend towards bipolarisation of the party system. However, at the same time, these elections also signalled that, after nearly a decade of unprecedented change in Italian politics, the so-called transition from the First to the Second Republic is still ongoing, and the future shape of the political system and the principal political forces remains uncertain.

The elections saw the victory of a centre-right alliance called the ‘House of Freedoms’ (*Casa delle Libertà*) led by Silvio Berlusconi and his party, *Forza Italia* (FI), over a centre-left coalition called the Olive Tree Alliance (*Ulivo*) which had been in office since the last elections in 1996 (albeit with four separate governments). As the prime-ministerial candidate of the successful coalition, Berlusconi therefore became Prime Minister for the second time (the first was in 1994), at the head of a coalition which, in addition to his own party, was comprised of: the Northern League; the National Alliance (AN); the *Biancofiore* (or ‘White Flower’, a coalition of two christian democratic parties, the Christian Democratic Centre (CCD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which emerged, in 1994 and 1995 respectively, as a result of the break-up of the Christian Democrats, DC), and the New Socialist Party (a party founded by Bettino Craxi’s son in honour of his late father – who, when he was leader of the former Socialist Party and Prime Minister in the early 1980s, had close links with Berlusconi). The defeated coalition, led by the former Mayor of Rome, Francesco Rutelli, was made up of: the Democrats of the Left (DS, the former Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) which had originated from the transformed Italian Communist Party, PCI); the *Margherita* (literally, the ‘Daisy’, an alliance of four parties of the centre: the Italian Popular Party (PPI, former Christian Democrats); the Democrats; Italian Renewal (RI), and the Union of Democrats for Europe, UDEUR); the *Girasole* (or ‘Sunflower’, an alliance between the Greens and the Democratic Socialists, SDI), and the Party of Italian Communists, a party which split from Communist Refoundation (RC, which had

---

\* Paper presented to the Elections and Parties Research Unit, University of Keele, 14 June 2001. A shortened and amended version will appear in *Parliamentary Affairs* in 2002.

itself split from the PCI when it became the PDS in 1991) after the latter brought down the Prodi government in 1998). The most significant parties which stood outside the two coalitions were: RC (which had stand-down arrangements with the *Ulivo* but only in the Chamber of Deputies); Pino Rauti's 'Tri-Coloured Flame' (which reached some stand down arrangements with the *Casa*); Antonio di Pietro's 'Italy of Values'; Sergio D'Antoni's 'European Democracy', and Emma Bonino's List (see [Figure 1](#) [in separate downloadable file]).

These elections stood out in Italy and the international community largely because of who was elected. Aside from the importance of the alliance that brought him victory, Silvio Berlusconi had not only come back to power after his government had been unceremoniously thrown out of office in 1994 by the withdrawal of support of the Northern League, but he emerged in an unassailable position. With 29.4 per cent of the vote (in the Chamber of Deputies), FI emerged as not only completely dominant within the centre-right coalition, but also the largest political party on the Italian political landscape, its nearest rival, the DS, being almost half its size with 16.6 per cent.

Indeed, to a large extent the election became more like a referendum on Silvio Berlusconi's credentials and his capacity for leadership (and whether or not he posed a threat to democracy), a referendum which he appeared unequivocally to win. At first sight, this is quite surprising, given that the centre left had been in power, and that, if the election were to be a referendum, one might have expected it to have focused on the centre left's performance in government (especially when many would argue that the record was good, if uninspiring).

Even more surprising, from this perspective, was the actual result when one considers Berlusconi's controversial situation. He had been under various investigations (some ongoing) on several charges relating to money-laundering, links with the Mafia, tax evasion, bribery (of politicians, judges and tax officials), and even complicity in murder, these charges constituting for many the main reason for his entry into politics in 1993 (i.e as the best means of defending himself). He was - for these reasons - condemned (in the middle of the election campaign) by most of the international press (led by the *Economist*) as 'not fit to lead the government of any country, least of all one of the world's richest democracies'.<sup>1</sup> His record in office was an extremely poor one: in 1994, he had been at the helm of one of the most divisive, ineffective and short-lived governments of the post-war period (after the collapse of which many predicted that his political career would be short-lived). Furthermore, his main allies - the regionalist (former

separatist) Northern League, led by Umberto Bossi (who was compared, by Francesco Rutelli, to Jorg Haider in Austria), and the former neo-fascist party, the AN, led by Gianfranco Fini - hardly engendered a sense of coherence or reasonableness.

Yet despite his controversial nature, and despite the centre left having a respectable record in office, not only did Berlusconi apparently achieve a clear victory, it was entirely expected (indeed, the only surprise was that it was not the landslide most predicted). From as early as 1999, opinion polls were suggesting that Berlusconi would be the next Prime Minister, and alarm bells were signalled in both the European elections in 1999 and the regional elections in 2000.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the election campaign, some polls gave the centre-right alliance a lead of as much as fifteen per cent. The centre-left parties were, therefore, the underdogs from the outset, and it was viewed to their credit and to a well-fought campaign, that the results were much closer than expected.

In short, much more so than in the elections of 1994 and 1996, the focus of this election was primarily on one man, and this explains why both the Italian and international press attempted to explain the results largely in this manner. There was, therefore, in press reports a sense that the election result could be put down to the fact that Italians had voted for whom they wanted: a strong, charismatic leader who was one of the wealthiest men in Europe, a successful entrepreneur who would do for Italy what he had done for himself. With this interpretation went, at times, hints of the historical context of 'strong leaders' in Italy. In other words, Berlusconi's success had much to do with the fact that, like Mussolini, he was viewed as a person who could get Italian trains to run on time. This is not to suggest that Berlusconi's political programme was viewed as a danger to democracy (although some observers felt that Berlusconi constituted a threat to democracy for other reasons), rather that Italians naturally looked to a strong charismatic leader in order to solve their problems.

Nevertheless, valid as these sentiments may be (i.e. there is no doubt that the election *was* about Berlusconi and his credentials), an approach which limits its analysis purely to an assumption that 'Berlusconi won' and that this was due to his personal appeal ends up being rather superficial as an explanation. Indeed, while it is true that these were the first elections of the Italian Republic (indeed, in Italian history) where the left was removed from power by the right, and that this was devastating for the left (thrown out of office after only a single term), it could also be argued that, rather than Berlusconi *winning* this election the centre left *lost* it, and

that it lost it largely because of its failure to incorporate within its alliance (or come to stand-down arrangements with) two parties, one of the left (Bertinotti's RC) and one of the centre (Di Pietro's 'Italy of Values'). In other words, the focus on Berlusconi during the campaign led to too much attention being focused on him in the press to explain the result, overlooking in the process, how the landslide never in fact occurred, and overshadowing a closer examination of the results which show that victory had been within the centre left's grasp. Indeed, while politically this election constituted, in the context of the three elections which preceded it, a further milestone, it did not, from a psephological perspective, constitute a watershed. On the contrary, a more apt analogy would be with Sherlock Holmes' dog which failed to bark.

Rather than trying to answer the simple question why Berlusconi won, we feel it more important to address four other questions: first, why the centre left failed to exploit its period in office between 1996 and 2001 to increase substantially its share of the vote and its popularity in the country; second, why Berlusconi was able to overcome significant political set-backs in 1994 and 1996 to increase his hold over the coalition, the standing of his party, and his own individual standing by 2001; third, the exact nature of the Berlusconi victory and how he secured it; fourth, the implications of the election victory for the future trajectory of Italian politics and Italian democracy. After a brief overview of the historical context of the elections, this paper analyses, in successive sections: the centre-left in power; the centre-right in opposition; the outcome; and, finally, the implications of the result.

### *Italy in Transition*

The first half of the 1990s was characterised by the undermining of the long-term stabilities which characterised the Italian political system, and specifically the dominance in power of one party, the DC, with its centrist allies, and the permanent exclusion of the largest communist party in the West, the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The agreement permanently to exclude the PCI from power (the so-called *conventio ad excludendum*), and a consequent failure to achieve alternation in government were regarded as the root causes of most of the Republic's ills: weak and unstable governments; politicisation of the state; corruption; policy immobilism; a failure to renew the political class, and alienation of the citizenry from the political system.<sup>3</sup>

The causes of the dramatic changes of the early 1990s were several and need not detain us here (they include the end of communism, economic and political pressures from European integration, the exposure of corruption, and the rise of new types of movement).<sup>4</sup> The important

point was that their chief expression was found in the swift and quite dramatic electoral and organisational collapse of the main parties of the old order; the removal of most of the political class; the mushrooming of new parties; moves towards institutional reform, and high levels of government instability. This period of turmoil produced a deep crisis, largely because key features of the old order collapsed but new political forces and institutions were not ready to take their place. Hence, a gradual transition ensued which was marked (in the period until 1996) by the continual postponement of democratic party government (because it proved unable to sustain the transition) and its replacement with governments of a purely technocratic nature.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, this crisis also produced high levels of optimism amongst many Italians, to whom it seemed evident that Italy was in transition (from a 'First' to a 'Second Republic'), and that – as with all transitions – there would be an outcome and that the outcome would be a more stable and mature democracy. For many this meant the achievement of a bipolarised party system with two fairly cohesive alliances competing for office around clear electoral programmes, something which would be underpinned or reinforced by institutional reform designed to support and complete the partial changes achieved with the electoral-system reform of 1993. Indeed, there was a sense conveyed in the views and writing of many commentators that there was a certain inevitability to the outcome of the transition: it was what, in their perception, Italy needed; it was what most other advanced democracies enjoyed; therefore it must and would happen.

However, this expectation overlooked the extent to which, despite (or perhaps because of) the transformation of the party landscape (and notably the dissolution of the PCI and apparent ending of ideological politics), the political struggle between different political forces was as intense as ever. Indeed, in many respects political competition was *more* intense than before since competition between parties had been opened up completely and, with the removal of the DC, the possible gains in terms of becoming a dominant party were considerable. Moreover, the institutional rules of the game were under discussion, meaning that all parties were looking to their future interests under different possible institutional arrangements.

What in fact happened, therefore, was, in a first phase, a decomposition and fragmentation of the parties, and subsequently, under the pressure of the reformed electoral system (whose partially majoritarian nature now meant that parties had to coalesce if they were to win seats in elections), a gradual recomposition of the parties into large, unwieldy and unstable alliances: for the 1994 elections, three alliances (centre left, centre, centre right), and then, in

1996, two alliances (left, right), in both cases with some parties standing outside the alliances altogether (See [Figure 1](#) [in separate downloadable file]). In 1994 this produced a victory for the centre right, led by Berlusconi, whose government collapsed after eight months, due to the withdrawal of the support of the Northern League, and led to premature elections in the Spring of 1996. These elections produced a victory for the centre-left coalition, which had evolved since 1994 and been named the Olive Tree Alliance (*Ulivo*), under the leadership of Romano Prodi. Perhaps ironically (in view of the Catholic-Communist divide which had made Italy so difficult to govern for half a century), the core of the Olive Tree Alliance was made up of the PDS and the PPI, albeit imbalanced towards the PDS (which had over three times the votes of its Catholic rival).<sup>6</sup>

There was, in 1996, a good deal of euphoria on the centre left, and expectations were high. This was the first time the left had entered government proper, and in doing so by defeating an alliance of the centre right, it had overcome a problem which had bedevilled Italy since Unification: the failure to achieve alternation in government. The *Ulivo*'s success introduced the possibility of completing Italy's transition by forging a single party of the centre left and by introducing institutional reform to buttress a bipolar system. At the same time, the *Ulivo* had the opportunity to display its credentials in government. However, all of these things were to prove more arduous than first imagined, and this, combined with Berlusconi's own activities in opposition, took the gloss off the centre-left experience to such an extent that, by as early as half way through the legislature, its electoral defeat at the hands of Berlusconi was already being widely predicted.

#### *The Centre-Left in Power 1996-2001*

Viewed purely from the point of view of performance in office (i.e. policy outcomes), there is a case for suggesting that the record of the centre left was sound, and therefore its defeat surprising. Indeed, at the heart of the election campaign run by Francesco Rutelli was the claim that the centre left stood for good government. Four features of its performance exemplify this.

First, in what was one of the most difficult periods in Italy's recent history, the centre left overhauled Italy's finances, drastically reducing the country's budget deficit in order to qualify for entry to the single European currency in 1999. While doubts remained as to whether Italy could meet its deficit target in 2001 (meaning a possible corrective budget later in the year), there was reasonable optimism by the time of the election that Italy was moving towards a balanced



budget in the medium term. Economic growth in 2000 reached 2.9 per cent, the highest for five years, something viewed by the outgoing government as a crowning achievement.

Second, the centre left carried through labour-market reforms (through the introduction of new short-term contracts) to begin to overcome what is a highly rigid labour market which has traditionally kept unemployment high (by employers' reluctance to employ people on a permanent basis because of the difficulty of sacking them). In March 2001, unemployment fell below ten per cent (to 9.9 per cent) for the first time in eight years (and it was estimated that it would drop to 9.5 per cent by 2002), due to an increase in full-time permanent jobs and a more vibrant labour market in the poorer South.<sup>7</sup>

Third, an important start was made in reforming the public administration. The Treasury Minister, Vincenzo Visco, overhauled and simplified the tax structure, and the Minister for Public Administration, Franco Bassanini, began a threefold process of decentralising public administration, reforming the central state apparatus, and simplifying the plethora of rules and regulations which bedevil both Italian citizens and companies in their relationship with the state.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, significant progress was made with the privatisation programme and, subsequently, with establishing effective market regulation to create competition and lower prices in areas such as telecommunications and electricity supply.

That the general record of the centre-left governments of this period was creditable was confirmed in an OECD report published about a month before the election. While emphasising that much still needed to be done, the report praised the record of recent governments, noting that 'The Italy of 2001 is far different from the Italy of 1990. Step by step, the interventionist, producer-oriented, rigid and centralised state of the post-war years is being transformed into a market-based, consumer-oriented and decentralised state.'<sup>9</sup> In outgoing Prime Minister Giuliano Amato's words, 'We're giving back to Italians a country that is different, healthier, richer, more credible.'<sup>10</sup> Small wonder that one foreign journalist, aware of how far ahead Berlusconi was in the opinion polls three months before the election, commented that, 'the centre-left has some serious achievements to its credit, but seems incapable of explaining this to the electorate.'<sup>11</sup>

The problem for the centre-left was less what it achieved than what it failed to achieve; why it failed to achieve it, and why it was unable to say anything convincing to the electorate

about how it would overcome that failure in the future and thereby make the *Ulivo* a more viable and exciting prospect for government. As Massimo Giannini commented, ‘The *Ulivo* did not manage to go beyond that level of *riformismo minimo* (‘minimal reformism’) which allowed it to govern realistically and honourably, but without making an impact, either by virtue of what it was doing or in terms of its promises for change, with new sectors of Italian society.’<sup>12</sup> This might be regarded as unfair comment in view of how much the *Ulivo* had to do in 1996. However, elections are not about fairness. Moreover, this is an argument about more than just the government’s economic achievements. It also concerns the broader political issue of the sort of image the *Ulivo* managed to create as a new, reformist political coalition in the context not just of governing Italy but of taking forward Italy’s transition towards a more stable and mature democracy. In short, what is being argued is that evaluation of the *Ulivo* experience was perhaps at a more demanding level than, say, evaluations of outgoing governments in other western democracies, because of the broader context of the role of the *Ulivo* in Italy’s transition; and it is in this context that one finds its real failure, for it is probably fair to say that Italians wanted, and expected, much more.

From the perspective of economic achievements, there was much more that needed to be done to reduce rigidities in the labour market and to take the privatisation programme forward, and the reform of the public administration (although significant) did little more than scratch at the surface of an enormous problem. More importantly, big issues such as reform of the pensions system (the most expensive in Europe) were put off because of the scale of the problem and the vested interests which had to be tackled to deal with it.

Finally, the signal achievement of the outgoing coalition, successful entry into the European Single Currency, was compromised by its impact on the electorate. In a country as pro-European as Italy, the first *Ulivo* government under Romano Prodi appeared to assume that such an achievement could only act to the incumbent government’s benefit - that it could only be a demonstration of its robust credentials. It was also aware of the potential political costs of aspiring to be a member of the Euro but then failing to meet the membership criteria. Consequently, its prime goal (to the neglect of other issues) was to enter the Euro. Yet, the benefits in the short-term proved to be elusive.

First, there was a certain degree of cynicism amongst Italians about the whole process and about the extent to which entry for aspiring countries was inevitable given the importance of

the European project. The criteria, therefore, were perceived as having flexibility to account for the weaker countries. The cynicism was reinforced by the manner in which Italy met the criteria, namely, by means of a European ‘super tax’ designed purely for that reason, rather than through any structural economic changes, something which suggested that the public accounts would continue to be difficult.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the perceived, and subsequently the actual, impact of joining the Euro was such as to generate, for the first time, a degree of real euroscepticism in Italy focused on whether the pain was necessary or justified. Italy joined the Euro as the third largest economy in the Euro-zone, but as one that was growing more slowly than any other economy during the period of the *Ulivo* governments. Growth amounted to an average of 1.7 per cent between 1995 and 2000 (compared to 2.5 per cent for the Euro-zone as a whole), and the economy was characterised by poor industrial competitiveness and a declining share of world exports. The drastic budgetary requirements involved in joining the Euro and then being part of it, where devaluation was no longer an option to increase the competitiveness of Italian exports, undermined the possibilities of any recovery of growth in the short-term. There was therefore little economic ‘feel-good’ factor during the period of the *Ulivo*, and joining the Euro did nothing to alleviate that. If anything it did the reverse, and, if there are to be medium to long-term economic gains, it will be the centre-right coalition that will now reap the political benefits.

In economic terms, therefore, the *Ulivo* was regarded as somewhat timid in its approach and its achievements. This may not have been especially problematic but for the presence of broader political factors which both helped to explain the *Ulivo*’s minimalism in the economic arena at the same time as revealing that, contrary to appearances, there was much which the *Ulivo* had failed to change in Italian politics, with consequent stultifying effects on the Italian transition. These political factors can be assessed under three broad headings: the *Ulivo* as government; the *Ulivo* as political project, and institutional reform.<sup>14</sup>

#### *ULIVO* AS GOVERNMENT.

The *Ulivo* was elected on the basis of a clear mandate given to an alliance of parties headed by Romano Prodi as prime-ministerial candidate and based on a programme for government. The fact that Prodi was effectively without a party attachment (there was a committee to elect Prodi which later became a forum) was significant. It suggested that his would be a different type of government to others, and the manner in which he proceeded to appoint ministers and govern

tended to confirm this. Prodi was determined to exercise the powers of the Prime Minister located in the constitution (long suppressed by the power of the parties) and he used the mandate he had received from the electorate in order to do so.

However, the government was dependent upon the votes of RC, and it was eventually RC which brought Prodi down in late 1998. The very change in government and the nature of the governments which followed not only transformed the entire image of the *Ulivo* as a new type of governing force, but for some amounted to a suppression of the mandate given to the coalition. As Pasquino argues, the appointment of Massimo D'Alema as Prime Minister represented not just a change in government and a change in the coalition supporting the government (i.e it was no longer an *Ulivo* government, but a more generic government of the centre left maintained in office by other non-*Ulivo* parties), but a reassertion of the power of the parties over government, and thus a reversion to First Republic-style politics.<sup>15</sup>

This was immediately visible in the number of governments which followed (two headed by Massimo D'Alema and one by Giuliano Amato) and in the difficulties they faced both in forming governments and in carrying through substantive policies without intensive horse-trading with the parties belonging to the coalition. Indeed, the formation of the Amato government after the April 2000 regional elections (with parties making their participation in the government conditional upon the ministries they would receive) was typical of First-Republic politics. Moreover, the government was led by one of the key (socialist) figures of the First Republic, someone who at one time had been a close ally of Bettino Craxi. It was the formation of this government which led former *Mani Pulite* ('Clean Hands') investigator, Antonio Di Pietro, to abandon the Democrats (founded by Prodi in 1999), to refuse to support the Amato government in the confidence vote, and subsequently to collect the signatures necessary to organise his own list and to field candidates belonging to his own movement.<sup>16</sup> The launch of 'Italy of Values', combined with the failure to reach stand-down arrangements with RC in the Senate, was to cost the *Ulivo* the election.

This is not to suggest that the *Ulivo* could not have effectively presented itself in the election campaign as the incumbent government. After all, despite the changes in Prime Minister and supporting parties, the *Ulivo* remained the bedrock of all four governments, and there was a sound record to extol. Yet, any possible advantage of incumbency was undermined when the link between alliance and government (which had been provided by Prodi) was broken as a

consequence of the *Ulivo*'s choice of prime-ministerial candidate for the 2001 elections. Logically, the existing Prime Minister (Amato) should have been chosen. However, the Democrats, who had never fully accepted the replacement of Prodi by D'Alema or Amato, made it clear that this was unacceptable, and, in September 2000, the more telegenic Francesco Rutelli (Mayor of Rome and a leading Democrat) was chosen to lead the coalition. The effect of this was to reinforce the impression that the *Ulivo* government had ended with Prodi and that the coalition campaigning for election was hardly representative of the current government. Because Rutelli was not, and never had been, a member of the government, it was difficult to claim the successes of the legislature as his own. It was difficult too to present the *Ulivo* as claiming a second term to complete the work the government had begun. In this respect, the contrast with Tony Blair's re-election campaign in Britain, which was taking place at the same time, could not have been starker. As Pasquino put it, 'The centre left had, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, forfeited the advantages of incumbency in exchange for the unknown value of Rutelli's candidacy.'<sup>17</sup>

In short, the problems facing the *Ulivo* as a result of its having failed to maintain a single government and Prime Minister in office were exacerbated by the split that was then formalised between the roles of Prime Minister (Amato) and of leader of the coalition (Rutelli), in September 2000. Rather than downplaying the differences in successive governments and presenting itself as an incumbent government claiming re-election after five years, the *Ulivo* rather let fester the image of governmental death at Prodi's fall, with the remainder of the legislature comprising three generic centre-left governments which (at least from the perspective of their formation and operation) differed little from their centre-left and *pentapartito* forbears in the 1960s and 1980s. As indicated above, there was some substance to this argument, the more so in view of the fact that the fall of the *Ulivo* government in 1998 was inseparable from the issue of the original aspirations for the *Ulivo* in the broader political trajectory of the centre left.

#### *ULIVO* AS POLITICAL PROJECT.

The significance of the *Ulivo* to the success of the centre left in the 1996 elections cannot be understated. The creation of the coalition, and the reaching of stand-down arrangements with RC (while not a formal member of the alliance) was crucial to the narrow defeat of the centre right. The *Ulivo* did what the Progressive Alliance had failed to do in 1994: unite a substantial component of the centre with the left. Moreover, it was not just the victory in and of itself which was of significance, but the fact that it could be interpreted as a crucial stage in the creation of a

strong and united political force on the centre left in the emerging bipolar world of Italian politics. The *Ulivo* coalition was, therefore, seen as a potential stepping stone to the creation of something more solid and lasting, and its electoral victory and governing experience was meant to act as a catalyst in this process.

The significance of the collapse of the Prodi government for the *Ulivo* cannot, therefore, be underestimated. After that date, the notion of building on the success of the *Ulivo* to create a more cogent political force was largely lost or exhausted. However, it would be too simplistic to suggest that government failure caused the political failure. Indeed, as Pasquino has suggested, while the fall of the Prodi government dragged the *Ulivo* down with it as a political force, it is also true to say that the failure of the *Ulivo* as a political project helped to bring down the government.<sup>18</sup> The fact was that the *Ulivo* was, from the outset, fragile and unstable, and, by the time the government fell, little progress had been made on taking it forward as a political project. This was due to the differing interests and strategies of the individual parties and their competing conceptions of how exactly the *Ulivo* should develop - differences which focused not just on how the *Ulivo* should be made up, but on its very nature and specifically on whether it should remain as a coalition or be developed into a single party.

There were those (such as Romano Prodi and the Democrats, and Walter Veltroni of the DS) who believed that the *Ulivo* could and should be developed into a single party of the centre left which would be democratic and reformist, but which, on the other hand, would not be wedded to the social-democratic tradition (the American Democratic Party was one model in mind). Others, on both the left and centre, instinctively felt that, because of its disparate nature, the *Ulivo* could never be anything more than a coalition, and that the different parties should recognise this, retain their distinctive autonomy but work towards solidifying that alliance.

At the same time, for some this latter position was more of a holding operation while they attempted to develop other political projects which, if successful, could only result in the demise of the *Ulivo*. These alternative political projects, in fact, came from both the left and the centre of the *Ulivo* (as well as beyond) and undermined any moves toward constructing a new party around the *Ulivo* on the basis of the 1996 electoral success.

On the left, the leader of the PDS, Massimo D'Alema, had never hidden his view (which put him in sharp contrast with his deputy Veltroni) that it was necessary to overcome a long-

standing anomaly in Italian politics: the absence of a genuine social- democratic party (something which would inevitably exclude several components of the *Ulivo*). The PDS had never managed this both because its birth in 1991 had never explicitly accepted the notion of social democratisation, and because the transformation of the PCI into the PDS, despite being apparently open to other political forces, had been a process essentially controlled by apparatchiks of the Communist Party. D'Alema was also aware that the size of the PDS was a problem in two contrasting (almost paradoxical) ways. On the one hand, as the main component of the centre left, the PDS undermined the stability of any coalition as long as it remained, in the perception of other forces, implicitly linked with its communist forbear. On the other hand, D'Alema was aware that the PDS was unlikely to grow any larger; indeed, the party was losing strength in terms of votes and members. He felt, therefore, that a social-democratic project, in bringing together the socialist, progressive catholic, republican and former communist traditions, would overcome the hesitations of others and provide the basis for a strong united force on the centre left.

D'Alema therefore launched, in early 1998, a process called *Cosa Due*, or 'second thing' – a label which recalled the fact that the process leading to the transformation of the PCI into the PDS had been dubbed *la Cosa* - and which was meant to culminate in a new party. This could hardly be deemed to have been successful. The participation of a number of small political forces produced, in February 1998, a largely bureaucratic, elitist exercise leading to the merger of the PDS with the United Communists (splinters of RC), Spini's Labour Federation, Gorrieri's Social Christians and Bogi's left Republicans. This resulted in the creation of a federal-like party, the cooptation of the leaderships into an enlarged executive, and the renaming of the party as the *Democratici di Sinistra* (Democrats of the Left, DS). In its ambiguity, this process failed to resolve the differences between those wanting a social-democratic party and those wanting to go beyond that tradition. In terms of renovation of the left, the exercise failed to achieve anything and *Cosa Due* was quickly forgotten.<sup>19</sup>

The confusion over the direction of the DS was heightened further when D'Alema, in the Autumn of 1998, gave up the leadership of the party to become Prime Minister, and was replaced by Walter Veltroni (Prodi's Deputy Prime Minister) who had little sympathy for the social democratic project his predecessor had been pursuing. Yet, his own idea (of a Democratic Party in the American mould) was further compromised by the decision of Prodi, in February 1999, to form a new party (the Democrats) which aimed at forming just such a political force. In the

European elections of June 1999, the Democrats obtained a significant 7.7 per cent of the vote, over half of which came from among supporters of the centre-left government. Yet, like other attempts earlier in the decade, rather than acting as a magnet for the creation of a substantial party of the centre left, the creation of the Democrats simply acted as a further element of fragmentation in this area of the political spectrum.

Prodi's manoeuvre, however, was not just aimed at the left of the *Ulivo*, but also at more moderate components which still harboured dreams of recreating a new political force of a genuinely centrist nature - one which could attract some of the centrist elements within the centre-right alliance (specifically the CCD-CDU); isolate the former communists (or cause a split amongst them), and either act as the main alternative pole to the centre-right alliance, or, if nothing else, hold the balance of power between the two alliances. The main political forces around which this debate focused were the PPI, the Democrats, RI and the UDEUR.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, these four parties formed an alliance within the *Ulivo* called the *Margherita* (or 'Daisy'). The future of this alliance (and especially its direction) would depend on its success at the election. However, the continued harbouring of aspirations for a *grande centro* was a constant destabilising factor to the *Ulivo*, one that hampered its growth as a political force.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the point about the *Ulivo* and its victory in 1996 was that it was meant to be a stepping stone towards a more integrated political force. This never occurred and this fact, combined with its failure to provide a genuinely new type of government, undermined the efforts of the *Ulivo* to increase its vote. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that it effectively disintegrated and was then hastily remoulded under pressure of the impending election (see [Figure 1](#) [in separate downloadable file]).

#### INSTITUTIONAL REFORM.

There is a long-standing consensus amongst Italian politicians and parties that Italy's institutions should be changed. This consensus is based on the premise that the dysfunctionality of the country's institutional arrangements lies at the heart of the problems of Italian democracy. Consequently, before the 1990s, debate about institutional reform figured prominently, and there was more than one serious attempt to carry through such reform. However, these attempts came to nothing in the face of disagreement between the various political parties.



The dramatic upheaval in Italian politics in the early 1990s was partly triggered by institutional reform, specifically the removal, by referendum in 1991, of preference voting in the electoral system. Through further referenda, which brought additional institutional changes, most notably an overhaul of the electoral system as a whole, institutional reform became an epiphenomenon of the dramatic party-system transformation it had partly caused. Consequently, the debate on institutional reform in the 1990s was different as compared with previous decades insofar as it was now widely felt that fundamental constitutional reform was needed to *complete* the Italian transition to a more stable, mature democracy.<sup>22</sup>

The first such attempt (between September 1992 and January 1994) came to nothing, largely as a consequence of the discrediting of many of its participants by the magistrates' *Mani Pulite* (Clean Hands) anti-corruption campaign.<sup>23</sup> The second attempt (led by Massimo D'Alema in 1997) came during the *Ulivo* period of office, through the setting up of the *Bicamerale*. This was a parliamentary commission whose remit was to produce proposals for the reform Part Two of the Constitution which sets out the institutional framework of the Republic. The Commission sat between February and November 1997 and, in a highly charged political atmosphere, produced a series of proposals which were heavily criticised by most observers as inadequate. These were submitted to Parliament for discussion and approval, and after tortuous progress through the two chambers, eventually came to nothing when Berlusconi announced in June 1998 that his party would no longer back the Commission's project. The experience revealed the extent to which each of the parties were pursuing strategies which would simply best further their own interests, something reflected in the proposals whose incoherence was the product of a set of uneasy compromises.<sup>24</sup> Pasquino's comments about the reform attempts of 1983 and 1993-4 were equally applicable to this experience:

The resistance to reform came from all Italian parties which feared that one way or another any institutional reform might curtail their power or their *political rents*, that is the advantages they were drawing from their political location in the party system and institutional system...Because several parties had a vested interest in maintaining the institutional system as it was, negative coalitions, that is opposed to any significant change, could easily be built.<sup>25</sup>

Three points should be made about this failure in relation to the *Ulivo*. First, the *Ulivo* government distanced itself from the *Bicamerale* because it feared that if it attempted to take up a clear position on institutional reform, it would pull the coalition apart. The inability of the Government to take up a clear position on something which was viewed as necessary to complete the Italian transition was symptomatic of the fragility of the *Ulivo* as a political construct. Indeed,

D'Alema's objectives were always conditioned by the knowledge that institutional reform could damage, if not bring down, the Government and, from that perspective, he viewed the completion of the Commission's work as a success. This fragility was confirmed in the different positions taken up by the parties on the various aspects under discussion and the interests they were evidently pursuing. Indeed, the accusation was that this went beyond parties to individuals. It was suggested that D'Alema himself was primarily motivated by the personal ambition of securing the highest positions of office (Prime Minister or President) and that chairing the commission would provide him with the legitimacy and authority to do so in the future.

Second, the failure ensured that the Bassanini and other reforms to regional and local government (notably the direct election of regional presidents and change in the regions' powers), would not be consolidated within the framework of a broader, constitutionally-based, federal imprint. Indeed, in this context it made the reforms appear rather timid.<sup>26</sup>

Third, pursuing a project from which the Government kept its distance entailed, at the same time, engaging and placating Berlusconi, since his and his party's agreement were essential to the achievement of reform. In this way, D'Alema effectively brought Berlusconi in from the cold and it was unsurprising that there was procrastination by the centre left in trying to resolve the media magnate's conflict of interests (which might have forced him to choose between his political ambitions and his role as entrepreneur). If the expectation had been that the achievement of institutional reform would reflect well on the *Ulivo*'s period in office, this was definitively dashed by Berlusconi's eleventh hour opposition to the project.

This failure was reinforced by the subsequent defeat of a referendum on the electoral system on 21 May 2000, which was aimed at removing the remaining proportional element of the system (left in place by the reform of 1993), and to which the centre left gave its strong support. Despite a majority in favour of the change, the turn-out failed to reach the necessary quorum of fifty per cent of the electorate. President Ciampi then made it clear that he wanted a reform of the electoral system in advance of the 2001 elections, but attempts by the Amato government to secure this foundered on Berlusconi's intransigence (probably motivated by his awareness that any reform would be seen as an achievement of the outgoing government).

To summarise, the *Ulivo*'s record in government was sound, and the coalition remained intact, or was reshaped, to fight a second election. Furthermore, anticipating arguments below, the

election result confirmed the *Ulivo*'s presence and relevance. However, at the same time, the *Ulivo* failed to make the sort of progress, politically or governmentally, that it needed to make if it were to succeed in providing its period in office with an image of newness such as to enable it to claim that it represented a distinct break with the politics of the past. It was riven by problems and features similar to those that had beset governments of the First Republic, and these affected its ability to convey the image of a strong united alliance with a trajectory towards a single party of the centre left. The failure to achieve institutional reform was perhaps symbolic of its limitations, institutional failure entwining with both political and governmental failure to overshadow the important economic achievements of the thirteenth legislature.

#### *The Centre-Right in Opposition 1996-2001*

When Berlusconi's government was brought down by the withdrawal of support of the Northern League in December 1994, many felt that the entrepreneur's political career would be short-lived. The investigations into his affairs by the magistrates, combined with the electoral defeat of 1996, reinforced this view. The problems experienced by the *Ulivo* outlined above are an important part of the explanation as to why Berlusconi was able to revive his political fortunes. But there were also important factors having to do with FI, the centre-right coalition and Berlusconi himself.

#### FORZA ITALIA

FI was gradually built up over four to five years. FI was rather disparagingly called both a *partito-azienda* (a party inseparable from Berlusconi's business empire) and a *partito di plastica* (a plastic party, or a party built upon the basis of his media empire), and there can be little doubt that these descriptions still retain some accuracy. Yet, at the same time, it is precisely these features which allowed FI to become the strongest party in Italy by the time of the 2001 elections - something which Berlusconi himself could not have imagined when he launched the party as a means of gaining power in order thereby to protect himself from the Italian magistrates. The success derived from using the logic of business and enterprise to conquer the electoral market: Berlusconi invented a product; put a huge amount of money behind it, and marketed it through the use of Fininvest, his media empire. Massimo Giannini argues that in the period between its birth and 2001, Berlusconi managed 'to give a profile and a legitimation to his political 'creature', and to forge a new 'social bloc'.<sup>27</sup> As he points out, to some extent the party can be described, not so much as 'the new Christian Democrats', but as 'the Christian Democrats of our times'. FI is a cross-class, part-Catholic, part-secular, inter-sectoral party, as well as a formidable media and propaganda machine with a loose organisational structure (resembling more a football

supporters' association than a political party), which is dependent on Berlusconi both for charismatic leadership and his supporting business and media interests. The consolidation of the party in Italy was matched at a European level, where FI was accepted into the European People's Party on 2 December 1999 (against the votes of the Italian centrist parties, the PPI the UDEUR and RI). This was a crowning achievement for Berlusconi who had strived hard to secure such an outcome as a means of obtaining broader legitimation for his party.

#### BUSINESS SUCCESS.

Berlusconi was assisted in this by an improvement in the economic fortunes of his companies. Struggling in 1994, his business empire was spectacularly successful between 1996 and 2001, making Berlusconi one of the richest men in Europe. This not only increased the resources he could make available to further his political ambitions, but – especially in Italy where self-made men tend to be highly regarded – it allowed him to project an extraordinarily simple message: that what he had done for himself he would do for Italy. Huge amounts of money were spent (largely in breach of campaign financing rules which are routinely ignored in Italy) on an election campaign which included massive coverage of Berlusconi and FI on his television channels, and the distribution of 16 million copies of *Una Storia Italiana* ('An Italian Story') to every household in the country. This pamphlet was a 130-page biography of Berlusconi, which included several photographs of him on virtually every page.<sup>28</sup>

#### MESSAGE.

Berlusconi put together an electoral platform which, in its simplicity and the manner in which he presented it, had the potential to reinforce the message that, as Italy's most successful entrepreneur, he could achieve great things, and that Italians should therefore place their trust in him. During the election campaign he signed a 'Contract with the Italian People', based on five general goals to change Italy, and five strategies to improve the quality of life of Italians. The goals were: first, a fundamental reorganisation of the state machinery (encompassing a major investment in the use of technology in all areas, from public administration to schools and universities); second, institutional reform, including the direct election of the President, a reduction in the number of MPs, devolution to the regions in various areas such as health, schools, law and order; third, a fundamental review and reform of the tax laws through a simplification of red tape; fourth, implementation of a major programme of public works; fifth, the implementation of a major plan for the development of the South. The five strategies were: first, lower taxes on families and businesses, less bureaucracy, and a reduction in the waste of

public money; second, the carrying out of a new social policy to assist the most disadvantaged, incorporating a rise in pensions and a reduction in tax on the lowest incomes; third, the implementation of a national project to reduce crime and control illegal immigration; fourth, implementation of major changes in schooling through a greater emphasis in the curriculum on the three 'i's: 'inglese' (English), the Internet and 'imprese' (enterprise); fifth, more effective control of pollution to improve the environment and the health of citizens.

The repetition of these goals and principles *ad nauseum* was accompanied by a marked refusal to engage in serious debate about policy. Indeed, the party's manifesto was only published a little over a week before polling day, and Berlusconi refused to meet Rutelli in a head-to-head television encounter. The entire approach reinforced the idea that the election was a plebiscite on Berlusconi.

#### ALLIANCES.

The difficulties experienced by the Northern League and the AN ensured that Berlusconi was able to forge a united coalition and exercise a dominant role within it, something which was in stark contrast with the divisions present in the centre-left alliance.

The Northern League had refused to join the coalition in 1996, gambling that, with an increased vote, it would hold the balance of power between the two coalitions. Despite its vote going up, however, it failed to secure this. In the period after 1996, the party oscillated between demands for separatism and demands for regional devolution, leaving it without a coherent line. In addition, its hostility to the Euro, and its prediction that Italy would fail to meet the criteria while demands from the North for separation would become irresistible, helped to alienate precisely those voters to whom it wished to appeal. Bossi was also aware that the single greatest threat to his party's vote came from FI, and that the League's vote would be squeezed whether in or out of the coalition. The 1999 European elections saw a decline in its vote to 4.4 per cent (from 6.6 per cent in the European elections of 1996 and from 10.1 per cent in the parliamentary elections of 1996). With its vote declining, the danger for the League in remaining apart was of dropping below the four per cent threshold for the allocation of seats under the proportional element of the electoral system, at the same time as facing fierce competition from FI in seats contested under the plurality element. Rather than risk being submerged, therefore, Bossi took the decision to reach an agreement with Berlusconi in return for assurances about seats in the Government in the event of victory.

Regarding the AN, an alliance with FI has been central to Gianfranco Fini's strategy of seeking to legitimise his party as a mainstream right-wing conservative party, and to replace Berlusconi as leader of the alliance. Fini's main fear was that of renewed isolation, and loyalty to Berlusconi constituted the main safeguard against this. If this made Fini's position weaker, the position was exacerbated by the AN's sharp drop in vote in the European elections in 1999. The decision was made to create a common list with the centrist Segni Pact, but their combined vote amounted to 10.3 per cent, compared with the 12.5 per cent and the 15.7 per cent which the AN had obtained on its own in the European elections of 1994 and in the parliamentary elections of 1996 respectively. Fini offered his resignation which was not accepted by his party's executive, but he came under attack for being overly critical of Berlusconi as his main ally and of taking the dilution of the AN's identity too far. After the defeat of 1999, Fini's loyalty to the alliance was never in doubt.

#### BERLUSCONI'S DIFFICULTIES

Berlusconi's judicial difficulties and the dilemma of his conflict of interests did not have the detrimental impact on his long-term campaign to be Prime Minister that many expected. On the contrary, it could be argued that, to some extent, Berlusconi was able to turn these to his advantage. His candidacy for the position of Prime Minister was controversial for three interrelated reasons.

First, there was the potential conflict of interests engendered by his position as the owner of Italy's three largest private television stations (not to mention his significant stakes in the print media as well), a situation which, in the event of an election victory, would effectively give him control of all of Italy's national television stations, public as well as private. Second, there were Berlusconi's outstanding court cases, based on allegations of corruption, false accounting and tax fraud. Things became particularly heated during the last two weeks of the election campaign after the *Economist* published a lengthy article (and lead editorial), complete with the headline 'Why Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy', and which went as far as to highlight allegations of links with the Mafia. This line was then followed by newspapers in a number of other European countries.<sup>29</sup> Third, there was Berlusconi's expressed desire to alter Part One of the Constitution (outlining the constitutional guarantees and basic principles to which ordinary legislation must adhere), by abolishing the constitutional provision obliging public prosecutors to investigate *all* cases of alleged wrongdoing brought to their attention, and replace this obligation with a new power of

Parliament to determine an ‘order of priority’ of cases to be investigated – a proposal which, were it to be enacted, had the potential to undermine the constitutional independence of the judiciary.

Clearly, these had the potential to be highly damaging. The first two factors allowed the centre left to argue that a Berlusconi victory would considerably heighten the significance of a conflict of interests to which Berlusconi had not indicated a clear solution, and would undermine Italy’s credibility and standing abroad. The third factor led a number of intellectuals, including the philosopher Norberto Bobbio, to launch an eleventh-hour, public appeal for a vote against Berlusconi on the frankly-stated grounds that he was a danger to democracy.

Yet Berlusconi was able to minimise the potential damage to his candidacy of these arguments, and to some extent turn them to his advantage. In relation to the first issue, the fact was that responsibility for the failure to regulate the conflict-of-interest situation lay largely with the governing parties of the thirteenth legislature. True, there were many who believed that the problem was incapable of resolution unless Berlusconi sold his television interests altogether (something he was unwilling to do), but there were other reasons (‘none of them noble’) why the centre-left parties had failed to press forward with the issue.<sup>30</sup> For some, it had been felt that leaving the situation unresolved would have a fatal impact on Berlusconi’s bid for election, and the feeling had been that maintaining a weak Berlusconi but one whose presence nevertheless kept Gianfranco Fini’s leadership ambitions in check (his potential appeal was feared on the centre left) was tactically for the best. At the same time, it had been recognised that Berlusconi’s participation and approval was essential to the achievement of institutional reform in the *Bicamerale*, and this ensured that he would not be marginalised and isolated. Curiously, if failing to act on the conflict of interests was meant to delegitimise Berlusconi’s candidacy, the *Bicamerale* did precisely the opposite, legitimising both his party and his leadership of that party.

In relation to the second issue, Berlusconi embarked at an early point in the legislature on an aggressive campaign against the magistrates and their methods, accusing them of being part of a left-wing conspiracy to discredit him. This was a high risk strategy, because of the widespread support for the magistrates’ actions. However, there is little doubt that, at a general level, the tide at a certain stage began to turn against the magistrates and their ‘Clean Hands’ campaign. There was a growing view that, whether or not they had overstepped their powers, their actions should be reined in for the sake of Italian democracy. Di Pietro later argued that the media played a

significant role in this reversal by increasingly portraying the magistrates' campaign as an unfortunate anomaly:

Those under investigation were falsely represented as victims and the judges as assassins, but no innocent person was imprisoned. Our media is notoriously successful at warping the truth. If they all say Clean Hands put innocent people in prison, then the general public will inevitably see Clean Hands in a poor light.<sup>31</sup>

Berlusconi consistently presented himself as a victim, and the portrayal had some resonance. Of note is the fact that, until the furore generated by the *Economist*, the centre left had been hesitant to make this issue central to its campaign (if anything, Rutelli had focused more on the dangers represented by Bossi), aware that it could rebound against them.

In relation to the third factor (and the two other factors in general), threats to democracy, conflicts of interest and corruption allegations are, by any measure, of a different order to taxation, public spending and other substantive issues and they tended to overshadow them in the later stages of the campaign. However, these former issues are rarely debated in such a manner as to allow voters to understand the institutional technicalities that usually underlie them precisely because they rarely enthuse voters. The prominence of such issues in the campaign, coupled with the candidate-centred focus of the two coalitions' campaigns and the fact that the Berlusconi camp was predicted to win handsomely, served to reinforce the idea (supported by Berlusconi himself), that this election offered not just a choice between alternative packages of policies but between entirely different political cultures, or the choice of a new 'revolutionary period',<sup>32</sup> and that the election was therefore a referendum on the man who could deliver it.

In an extraordinary manner, therefore, Berlusconi managed to convey the impression that the *Ulivo* stood for continuity with a largely discredited politics, while he stood for a definitive break with that tradition. It was extraordinary because, paradoxically, this was also the man who, given the history of his actions and his relationship with Bettino Craxi, surely had the best credentials for anyone seeking to cast their vote on the basis of nostalgia for the First Republic.

*The dog that failed to bark: the election outcome*

Aside from the victory of the *Casa delle libertà*, the most striking features of the election result were three-fold: the higher-than-expected turnout; stability in the distribution of the vote between the two cartels combined with significant changes in relative party strengths *within* each cartel; the way in which the distribution of parliamentary seats was affected by the constellation of party



line-ups on the one hand combined with the electoral system on the other. These three features meant that, notwithstanding Berlusconi's victory and the defeat of the *Ulivo*, this election had a great deal in common with the one held five years earlier. Thus, very similar proportions of the electorate went to the polling booths as had done so in 1996. Once there they distributed their ballots between centre left and centre right much as they had done five years earlier (and in so doing denied Berlusconi the avalanche of votes that many had been predicting). When they woke the following morning, they discovered that, like Romano Prodi the last time round, Berlusconi was to be the next Prime Minister essentially because he had managed to construct the more efficient system of alliances given the electoral system in force, rather than because of any significant shifts of popular support.

#### TURNOUT AND THE VOTE

Many voters might well have woken feeling bleary-eyed and irritable the day after the election, for a clause in the 1997 finance law leading to a reduction in the number of polling stations from 91,000 to 60,375 as compared to 1996 meant that some had had to stand in queues for many hours before getting a chance to express their preferences. Although polling stations officially closed at 10.00 p.m. on election day, the last vote was reportedly not cast until four o'clock the following morning,<sup>33</sup> in Terreti near Reggio Calabria, and television images of queues stretching in some cases to over one-hundred metres led to initial expectations that turnout would be 'massive'. In the event, at 81.2 per cent for the Chamber of Deputies and 81.3 per cent for the Senate, it was down by 1.7 per cent and 0.9 per cent for each branch of Parliament respectively.

It had been expected that the rate of abstention would be much higher, if for no other reason than that participation has fallen at every general election since 1976; and, had it maintained the annual rate of decline registered in 1996 (when turnout for the Chamber of Deputies fell by 3.2 per cent from the 86.1 per cent of the 1994 election) it would have been some six percentage points lower than it was. As it is, the slowdown in the rate of decline leaves Italy well above the European average for general-election turnouts of about seventy-five per cent and this, coupled with the television images of the long lines of voters, means that 2001 will almost certainly be remembered as an election that stimulated unusually high levels of participation.<sup>34</sup> The out-of-the-ordinary level of voter interest can largely be explained by the features of the campaign relating to Berlusconi outlined above, something that may have led voters to perceive the stakes as unusually high.

If, as Berlusconi wanted to portray it, the election amounted to a referendum on himself, then in a very real sense, as the figures in Table 1 suggest, he must be said to have lost it. When we compare both the plurality and the proportional vote totals achieved by the parties of the *Casa delle libertà* in 2001 with the totals achieved by the same parties five years earlier (that is, 45.4 per cent and 49.6 per cent as compared with 51.1 per cent and 52.2 per cent) what we find is that the centre right actually lost support. Moreover, had Berlusconi's charismatic appeal been a genuine vote-winner, then, against what actually happened, we might have expected the plurality vote total for the *Casa delle libertà* to exceed the combined total achieved by each of its constituent parties in the proportional vote. For, given that its campaign symbol, dominated by the words, '*Berlusconi Presidente*', made perfectly clear how much the coalition's image was dominated by the image of its leader, a plurality vote total higher than its combined proportional total, might have suggested that Berlusconi had a capacity to attract votes beyond the ranks of his coalition's target electorate. As it was, the plurality vote achieved by the *Casa delle libertà* was some five per cent below its proportional total with the reverse being true for the parties of the centre left. Where the personal appeal of Berlusconi does seem to have had an impact is within the *Casa* itself insofar as striking gains for FI (its list-vote total rising by almost nine per cent as compared to 1996) were balanced by combined losses of approximately the same order of magnitude among its allies. Of course, one must be wary of using aggregate data to make inferences about change in the behaviour of individuals, but it does seem reasonable to assume that by far the greater part of FI's striking gains will have come from its allies rather than elsewhere for we know that voters who switch parties from one election to the next are far more likely to defect to a party belonging to the same electoral coalition than to one outside it.<sup>35</sup>

The picture of essential stability in the proportion of the vote won by the centre right overall was, not surprisingly, matched by broad stability in the proportion of the vote going to the coalition of the centre left. True, its constituent parties' combined list-vote total was, at forty per cent, some three per cent down on what had been achieved in 1996, but much of this could probably be explained by the support won by di Pietro's 'Italy of Values'.

As on the centre right, the most significant changes were in terms of the shift in the distribution of support within the coalition, most notable being the decline in support for the DS to 16.6 per cent (the lowest level of support registered by the principal party of the left in the whole of the post-war period with the exception of 1992) and the gratifying performance of the Daisy. On its own, the size of the latter result was not especially significant. The Daisy's

constituent parties had actually done slightly better the first time they had all been present at a single election, that is, at the 1999 European Parliament election when their combined score had been 14.7 per cent. And in 1996, the *Ulivo* centre parties had won a not vastly inferior combined vote of 11.1 per cent. The significance of the result lay not in its size, but in the fact that it was the result of a single formation faced with a left in decline (so that it would clearly have implications for the future distribution of power within, and the political complexion of, the centre left).

As for the left party itself, its fairly hefty 4.5 per cent drop in vote was by many attributed to the difficulty it had had in maintaining any kind of high profile in the campaign, something that was in part due, as outlined above, to its leaders' continuing inability to decide what kind of profile they wanted it to have in the first place. At the 1999 European elections, the party's vote had declined from the 21.1 per cent it won in 1996 to 17.7 per cent. In view of the significance of its long-term difficulties, the party's 2001 result is probably best seen as a further slight decline from the already low European result, rather than the sudden, dramatic drop that it appears to be when measured against the 1996 result.

Of course the lack of significant voting shifts we are arguing for here could be masking significant underlying changes in the geographical distribution of voting strengths, and to examine this possibility we drew up Table 2 showing the proportions of the Chamber list vote obtained by different parties and combinations of parties in 1996 and 2001, as well as changes in these proportions, within the four geo-political areas into which Italy is conventionally divided. The figures in the third column for each of the areas show the changes in parties' support by expressing the proportion of the vote they achieved in 2001 as a percentage of the proportion they achieved in 1996. Thus, the 9.1 per cent achieved by the AN in the North in 2001 represents a share of the vote that is 17.3 per cent lower than its 1996 share of eleven per cent. The figures in these third columns thus show for each party and group of parties the change in its performance relative to its own previous performances.

The impression one gets from Table 2 is that while there have been some shifts in the geographical distribution of voting strengths, these are not so dramatic as to have brought about many notable departures from established patterns. Thus, within the centre left we see the parties with ties to the old Communist tradition turning in their best performances, as ever, in their heartland area of the central regions; while at the other end of the political spectrum, AN

continues to do better in the South than in the North (a phenomenon traditionally explained by reference to the party's historic ties with fascism: while in the North the latter signified cruelty and German occupation, these connotations were less strongly felt in the South where the state-based welfare side of fascism had been more in evidence). Beyond these well-known features of voting and geography in Italy, the figures in Table 2 point to two tendencies. First, on the centre right there is a decline in regional disparities. Thus the increase in FI support is somewhat less dramatic in the South and Islands, where in 1996 it had already done well, than it is in the Centre and North, where it had done less well. On the other hand, AN's decline is more marked in the South and Islands where it has traditionally done better than it is in the North where it performs less well. Second, on the centre left, we see a shift in the centre-of-gravity of the support for the communist and ex-communist parties insofar as their decline (and indeed that of the centre left as a whole) is noticeably less marked in the North than it is anywhere else.

The fairly noticeable increases in levels of support going to parties other than those belonging to the two main cartels, especially in the North, reflect, of course, the votes won by the two most important of the formations that refused to join either cartel: di Pietro's Italy of Values, and Sergio d'Antoni's European Democracy. In reflecting a recognition of the significance of party alliances and their absence, this strategy throws a spotlight on what was the most important influence on the election outcome, namely, the precise set of choices that voters were presented with in the first place.

## THE ALLIANCES

At any election conducted on the basis of an electoral system other than one that is proportional, parties are obliged to consider the likely impact on the final distribution of seats, given the distribution of political preferences among the electorate, of their own decisions about candidatures. In principle, these decisions will be at least as significant for the distribution of seats that results from an election as shifts in voters' preferences. In order to see the impact of these decisions in bringing about the change in parliamentary majority that took place at the 2001 election, we have first to understand a few of the finer details of how the electoral system works.

Three quarters of the seats in both chambers of Parliament are distributed according to the single-member, simple plurality system, one quarter proportionally. In the case of the Senate, the country is divided into 237 single-seat colleges within which the voter chooses his or her preferred candidate. The candidate winning the most votes is elected. The remaining seventy-

eight seats are distributed among the country's twenty regions according to size and are allocated proportionally according to the d'Hondt highest average formula. Within each region, the parties' vote totals are calculated and then discounted by the votes received by candidates that have been elected outright in the single-member colleges. This is the so-called *scorporo* (or 'deduction of votes'). Seats are then given to the (not already elected) candidates of parties entitled to receive seats in accordance with the size of such candidates' vote shares.

In the case of the Chamber, twenty-seven constituencies are sub-divided into 475 single-member colleges within which the voter makes a choice of candidate and the candidate winning the most votes is elected. Candidates in the single member colleges must be supported by at least one of the party (or party coalition) lists presented at constituency level for the distribution of the remaining 155 seats. The voter has a second ballot with which to make his or her choice among these lists. The proportionally distributed seats are allocated only to those lists that receive at least four per cent of the national total of valid list votes cast. Seats are then allocated to lists in three steps. First, in each constituency, each qualifying list's 'electoral total' is calculated. This is its vote total minus, for each of the party's candidates elected in single-member colleges in the constituency, a sum of votes equal to the total obtained by the second-placed candidate. Again, this is known as the *scorporo*. Second, the sum of all qualifying lists' electoral totals are divided by the number of proportional seats allocated to the constituency to obtain the constituency electoral quotient. Third, each party's electoral total is then divided by the quotient to determine the number of seats to which it is entitled.<sup>36</sup>

Two features of this system in particular are crucial for parties' decisions about whether and with whom to field candidates. First, the proportional element in theory offers weak actors unable to win many of the seats distributed according to the plurality formula, a means of winning a share of seats that could nevertheless, depending on the distribution of seats among the remaining contenders, give them a position of enormous power in the parliamentary arena. For, through the mechanism of the *scorporo*, the proportional element in fact offers non-aligned formations the possibility of winning a larger share of these seats than their proportional totals. In 1994, for example, the Pact for Italy took 27.1 per cent of the Chamber proportional seats for 15.7 per cent of the Chamber list vote. In 1996, the Northern League took thirteen per cent of the Chamber proportional seats for 10.1 per cent of the Chamber list vote. Clearly, both di Pietro and d'Antoni hoped that this mechanism would help them achieve a position of indispensability in the formation of any feasible governing majority in the new legislature. However, this strategy only

works if the party or party coalition succeeds, in the case of the Chamber, in clearing the four per cent threshold - and neither of the aforementioned did so. In fact, the four per cent threshold has been rather successful in reducing fragmentation: thirteen and eight lists won representation in the Chamber under the plurality and proportional elements respectively in 1996. In 2001, the corresponding figures were ten and four respectively. This then points to the second crucial feature of the electoral system which is that the plurality element, which seems such an obstacle to small parties, is 'only a potential hindrance which can be avoided via agreements, exchanges, divisions and similar manoeuvres'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the plurality element offers smaller parties a means of defence arising out of the knowledge that though they may not be able to win single-member contests on their own, failure to reach agreement can cause their larger party interlocutors to lose.

This strategic circumstance was crucial to the victory of the centre right. In 1996, the Chamber election had seen the centre right defeated by the *Ulivo* in fifty-nine single-member colleges seemingly as a result of independent candidatures by the Northern League and in a further thirty-four as a result of independent candidatures by the far-right Tri-Coloured Flame. And it had seemed likely that, but for the effects of these candidatures, the centre left would have been denied an overall majority.<sup>38</sup> In the 2001 election, the centre right took back thirty-five of the seats it had lost as a result of independent League candidatures the last time round and, by persuading the neo-fascists to stand down in most of them, twenty-one of the seats it had lost because of the intervention of the Flame. Of course the centre right might have won these seats back even had it failed to reach an accommodation with the League and the Flame for both the latter parties' votes were in decline (see Table 1). Perhaps somewhat less uncertain is the impact of the candidates fielded by Di Pietro. If we assume that those who voted for these candidates would have supported the *Ulivo* in the absence of the ex-public prosecutor's intervention, then the number of seats lost by the centre left as a result of its failure to reach an agreement with Di Pietro can be set at fifty-seven - fifty-seven being the number of colleges where the sum of the vote received by the *Ulivo* candidate and the candidate representing Di Pietro's party was larger than the vote received by the winning candidate of the centre right. And had the *Ulivo* won all these seats, then what was a centre-right majority in the Chamber of 107, might have been a centre-left majority of four.<sup>39</sup> Looking at the other side of the balance sheet, one might want to deploy the same reasoning to suggest that the centre right lost seats as a result of the intervention of D'Antoni; and of course the 'seat tally' one comes up with depends on the admittedly questionable - and counter-factual - assumption that all or a sufficiently large number of Di

Pietro's supporters would have voted centre left in the absence of their preferred candidate while D'Antoni's supporters would have voted centre right.

Rather less prone to queries of this sort seems to be the outcome of the Senate election. There were twenty-seven colleges where the sum of the vote received by the *Ulivo* candidate and the candidate representing RC was larger than the vote received by the winning candidate of the centre right. Here it is more reasonable to assume that those who voted for the smaller formation would have supported the larger one in the absence of their preferred choice, since RC is positioned to the left of the *Ulivo* and has no significant competitors to *its* left. Since the centre right's majority in the Senate was thirty-nine seats, it is highly probable therefore that, had the *Ulivo* and RC managed to come to a stand-down arrangement, the Senate election would have delivered a majority, in that chamber of Parliament, to the centre left.

There are a number of explanations for why it was that the *Ulivo* and RC found themselves competing against each other in the Senate elections, ranging from the immediate term and technical to the longer term and political. All played their part. First, there was the nature of the electoral system itself. In the Chamber election with its separate ballots for the plurality and proportional contests, RC was able to give its sympathisers an opportunity to vote for the party without the risk of this damaging the centre left, by means of its decision to present candidates for the proportional contest only, leaving its supporters free to vote for *Ulivo* candidates in the single-member colleges. In the Senate, with its single ballot, this was not possible. Second, while its decision not to contest the Chamber single-member colleges had been unilateral, RC had sought to come to an accommodation with the *Ulivo* such as to avoid damaging conflict on the left in the Senate race too. The principle immediate-term reason why the two sides failed to reach agreement, had to do with what were called *le liste civetta* or 'the decoy lists'.

Decoy lists were bogus lists of candidates that each of the two main coalitions fielded for the Chamber proportional contest in order to avoid the impact of the *scorporo*. Since candidates in the single-member colleges must declare an affiliation with at least one of the lists presented for the proportional contest, if parties insist that their candidates instead affiliate to bogus lists on behalf of which they do no campaigning, then, when it comes to calculating parties' electoral totals, their real lists suffer no deduction of votes and as a consequence they receive more

proportional seats than they would have done had the spirit, as well as the letter, of the law been observed:

In 2001 practically all FI candidates in single member constituencies declared their affiliation with a decoy list called *Per l'abolizione dello scorporo. Per la stabilità di governo. No ai ribaltoni.* (For abolition of the deduction of votes. For stable government. Against the reversal of governing majorities) rather than with an FI list. As for the centre left, their decoy list, put up in nineteen out of the twenty-six districts, was called simply *Paese Nuovo* (A New Country).<sup>40</sup>

Obviously, *liste civetta* benefit larger formations - which by definition win large numbers of single-member colleges and whose lists thus normally suffer a correspondingly hefty subtraction of votes for the purposes of deciding the number of proportional seats to which they are entitled - at the expense of smaller ones. Indeed during the election campaign, Bertinotti claimed that the presentation of these lists amounted to a veritable case of electoral fraud. Unfortunately, the logic of collective action proved to be an insurmountable obstacle in the search for an agreement on the matter. Since the centre right had been predicted to win large numbers of colleges, it would not forgo the use of decoy lists. As long as the centre right would not forgo the use of such lists the centre left felt unable to do so either. But as long as this was the case, and as long as a change in the electoral law prior to the vote was not feasible or not desired (views about which it was differ), then Bertinotti's grievance could not be redressed.

Finally, the centre left's loss of the Senate contest could have been avoided if, as Lucio Magri argued in the election's immediate aftermath, the *Ulivo* and RC had agreed to 'asymmetric' stand-down arrangements.<sup>41</sup> That is, RC would have been unopposed by the *Ulivo* in those colleges it knew it had no chance of winning, thus allowing RC to gain sufficient votes to allow some of its candidates to be elected via the proportional formula. In return, RC would have forgone the presentation of candidates in at least some colleges where there was a risk of split voting leading to the election of centre-right candidates. Logically, such an arrangement presupposed a degree, at least, of programmatic convergence between the two sides since it would have involved denying at least some of their supporters the possibility of choosing between the two. That even such a straightforward stand-down arrangement as the aforementioned one eluded the parties must therefore ultimately be put down to the profound longer-term political differences between the two sides.

The fact that RC was born simultaneously with the PDS, on the break-up of the PCI, as the party that rejected the transformation of the latter into a non-communist party, means that



since the beginning, its very *raison d'être* has required it to distinguish itself sharply from the main party of the left. Hence, though in no sense a revolutionary party (Bertinotti once described his position as 'neo-Keynesian'),<sup>42</sup> RC has theorised a view of the Italian left that sees it as permanently divided into two branches: a governing left, represented by the DS, and an oppositional, radical left, represented by itself.<sup>43</sup> Seeking to provide representation for voters wanting radical change, and viewing the DS as a party that, through its embrace of neo-liberal theories, has abandoned the working class and the poor, RC sees its programme as 'incompatible with the creation of a bipolarised political system built around the two barely differentiated coalitions on the centre left and the centre right'.<sup>44</sup> This means that there are clear limits to the price RC is willing to pay in order to reach, with the remainder of the centre left, electoral accommodations whose fundamental purpose is precisely the consolidation of party-system bipolarity.

#### *The aftermath and implications*

In view of the extent to which the outcome had been influenced by the composition of the electoral alliances rather than by losses of votes, reactions on the centre left in the immediate aftermath of the campaign were characterised by a relative absence of despondency combined with condemnation of RC for having supposedly been the principal architect of the centre left's defeat. Neither reaction was appropriate. On the one hand, though the centre left's vote had, in broad terms held up, and though this did contrast fairly starkly with what opinion polls had been suggesting just a short time before, there were, as hinted at earlier in this article, a number of grounds for thinking that if anything the centre left's vote ought to have gone up. That it did not do so must be attributed in large measure (a) to the inability of the centre left - for a variety of reasons analysed here in earlier sections - effectively to capitalise on the advantages of incumbency, and (b) to its overestimation of the strength of the anti-Berlusconi card. With regard to the latter point, while in the immediate aftermath there was some puzzlement expressed in the international media about how, crudely put, Italians could have voted for 'a gangster like Berlusconi', one must remember that most of the time the personal misdeeds - real or alleged - of politicians anywhere are of only limited electoral impact. As McAllister puts it:

...the principle of 'throwing the rascals out' ... assumes that electors are sufficiently well informed ... [and] will be able to overcome their partisan loyalties, by perhaps voting against their favoured party in order to remove an unsatisfactory elected representative.<sup>45</sup>

Yet what precisely seemed to characterise this election - at least in broad terms - was how strong partisan loyalties seemed to be. On the other hand, the *Ulivo* could not really blame its defeat on

Bertinotti. If two sides come into conflict because of a diversity of views between them - then the causes of the conflict, by definition, lie on *both* sides. Therefore, commentators such as Ezio Mauro and Paolo Flores d'Arcais would have done their readers a better service had they provided an analysis of the outcome which went beyond seeking to 'explain' it in terms of the 'madness', 'egoism' and 'masochism' of Bertinotti and his followers, offering instead an analysis of the difference of political views underlying the failure of the *Ulivo* and RC to agree in the first place.<sup>46</sup>

In organisational terms, the most significant consequences for the centre left were the prospects of the *Ulivo* becoming a less fragmented and unwieldy coalition through the possibility that the components of the *Margherita* might seek to consolidate their new-found collective strength vis-à-vis the DS by becoming a fully-fledged political party. The views of its constituent members differed on how far and how fast this process should go in the immediate term, according to differing points of view about how the *Ulivo* as a whole should develop, but all were agreed on the creation of a single parliamentary group as a first step, something which took place when the new parliament was convened at the end of May. The prospects of the *Margherita* developing into a more cohesive entity with time are heightened by the awareness of each its components that an autonomous political existence for it would simply be unfeasible,<sup>47</sup> and that the size of Berlusconi's majority makes it unlikely that it could find satisfaction of any discontents it might have in the offer to act as *trasformisti* (turn coats). Meanwhile, the DS was forced to come to terms with its not insignificant electoral retreat and attempted to do so by the decision to elect a new general secretary (who, in local elections held in concomitance with those for Parliament, was elected mayor of Rome) at a special party congress to be held in the autumn. This congress would seek to learn the lessons of an election campaign in which the party had failed to involve large sections of its membership,<sup>48</sup> as well as continuing the search for a clear identity for the party.

On the centre right, Berlusconi was sworn in as the Prime Minister of a governing coalition that gave every appearance of being considerably more robust than the short-lived coalition he had headed in 1994. This was not only a consequence of the solid majority it enjoyed in both chambers of Parliament (the first time in Italy's history that an election had produced an unequivocal majority for a pre-constituted coalition) but more importantly because of the balance of power between its various components. What was outstanding about this was the virtually unassailable position of Berlusconi and FI within the coalition. On the one hand, the election had

confirmed the reduction in bargaining power of the smaller components through their failure to surmount the four per cent threshold, while the one component other than FI itself that did manage to surmount it, namely AN, continues to be subordinate to FI quite simply because of the constant risk attaching to *insubordination*, namely, that it results in the party being chased back into the ghetto to which it had been confined for almost half a century prior to the early 1990s. As long as there exist in the Italian electoral and parliamentary arenas parties that continue to harbour ambitions of resurrecting some sort of *grande centro*, it will remain the case that AN's room for manoeuvre will be limited by the fact that 'alliance strategies which exclude the National Alliance could at some stage turn out to be more congenial to Berlusconi.'<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the distribution of parliamentary seats among the parties making up the governing coalition makes clear that Berlusconi is, if he wishes, free to govern without the support of one of his three main coalition partners, this being precisely the party that had consistently shown itself to be the most unreliable and cantankerous of his allies, namely, the Northern League.

The Berlusconi government, then, might turn out to be relatively stable as compared to the average for post-war Italian administrations and more stable than most had assumed prior to the election on the basis of the well-known policy differences among its component parts, especially the Northern League and the AN. And in the process of assuming office, Berlusconi made a significant move likely to increase the stability of his administration still further. This was to include each of the main party leaders within government or in positions very close to the Government. Thus, the AN's leader, Fini, became Deputy Prime Minister; the Northern League's leader, Bossi, became Minister for Institutional Reform; the CDU's leader, Rocco Buttiglione, became Europe Minister; the CCD's leader, Pierferdinando Casini, became President of the Chamber of Deputies. Inclusion of the party leaders in Cabinet in this way is unusual for post-war Italy which had, on the contrary, been characterised by a tendency for the most senior party leaders to remain outside government, delegating ministerial tasks instead to less powerful party figures. The advantage of this from the parties' point of view had been that it had allowed them to keep Cabinet and Prime Minister in a state of relative weakness with Cabinet Ministers owing their positions essentially to their party secretaries, and to agreements between the secretaries who would often agree policy away from the arena of Cabinet altogether within the framework of periodic 'majority summits'. If, as Cotta<sup>50</sup> argues, this distance between parties and government made it difficult for the former to benefit from the fund of authority and legitimacy that goes with the assumption of public office, the reverse side of this coin was that it made it easier for parties to decline responsibility for, and avoid the electoral consequences of, unpopular policies. So by

including the party leaders in his cabinet, Berlusconi binds the prospects of any one of the parties individually much more closely than is normal to the success or otherwise of the Government as a whole, in the process strengthening his own hand vis-à-vis his governing partners and that of the executive vis-à-vis Parliament. The decision to give Bossi the position of Minister for Institutional Reform was particularly shrewd. For, in a context in which decentralising reform is, through a variety of measures taken in recent years, already a well-established and on-going process broadly supported across the political spectrum, the appointment has in effect neutralised Bossi. With wide latitude to pave the way to the more decentralised Italy that he has always campaigned for, he will be in no position to make political capital by blaming his allies if the project fails.

Of course the prospects of the Government, and its likely impact on the quality of Italian democracy, over the longer term will depend on a range of exogenous factors whose future development is impossible to predict with any degree of confidence. Two points are worth making however. First, as far as the quality of Italian democracy is concerned, while Berlusconi's victory almost certainly marks the end of a decade of judicial activism as a potential reforming force in Italian politics,<sup>51</sup> the new Prime Minister's conflict of interests and court cases will not go away. Bearing in mind the significance of standards of political behaviour and the quality of ethical leadership to levels of corruption and similar pathological phenomena in a society, the ways in which these issues are dealt with will, of course, be crucial. Second, as far as the Government's own prospects are concerned, much seems likely to depend on its ability to meet the very high popular expectations it aroused to get itself elected and to reconcile these, on the other hand, with pressures working in the opposite direction. For example, the 'Contract with the Italian People' famously signed by Berlusconi, on television, during the course of the campaign, contains, amongst other things (see above) specific pledges to reduce taxes while also raising pensions. On the other hand, powerful supporters of Berlusconi, such as *Confindustria* (the Confederation of Italian Industry), shortly after the election called on the new government to be prepared to take 'unpopular' measures and most commentators are predicting that the presentation of the autumn Finance Law to Parliament will be a particularly crucial moment for the new government. Yet it will be a moment faced by a government that has a solid majority, whose smaller components are without blackmail power, and that is faced by an opposition still dealing with the difficulties of the search for a clear identity and the ability to speak with a single voice. For this reason, the prospects of Italy having a government that lasts for an entire legislative term would seem to be greater now than they have ever been before.

**Table 1**  
**The Chamber of Deputies Elections of 1996 and 2001**

| <b>1996</b>      |             |                     |                       |             | <b>2001</b>      |               |                     |             |                       |             |             |
|------------------|-------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|---------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Plurality</i> |             | <i>Proportional</i> |                       |             | <i>Plurality</i> |               | <i>Proportional</i> |             |                       |             |             |
| <i>Vote</i>      |             |                     | <i>Vote</i>           |             | <i>Vote</i>      |               | <i>Vote</i>         |             | <i>Vote</i>           |             |             |
| Coalition        | Vote (%)    | Seats (No.)         | Parties and alliances | Vote (%)    | Seats (No.)      | Coalition     | Vote (%)            | Seats (No.) | Parties and alliances | Vote (%)    | Seats (No.) |
|                  |             |                     | PDS-Sin. Eur          | 21.1        | 26               |               |                     |             | DS                    | 16.6        | 31          |
|                  |             |                     | P. Sardo d'Az         | 0.1         | 0                |               |                     |             | Margherita            | 14.5        | 27          |
|                  |             |                     | Verdi                 | 2.5         | 0                |               |                     |             | Girasole              | 2.2         | 0           |
|                  |             |                     | PPI-SVP-PRI           | 6.8         | 4                | l'Ulivo-SVP   | 1.6                 | 8           | Pdci                  | 1.7         | 0           |
|                  |             |                     | RI                    | 4.3         | 8                | l'Ulivo       | 43.7                | 184         |                       |             |             |
| l'Ulivo          | 42.3        | 247                 | Total                 | 34.8        | 38               | Total         | 45.3                | 192         | Total                 | 35.0        | 58          |
| Progressisti     | 2.6         | 15                  | Rif. Com.             | 8.6         | 20               |               |                     |             | Rif. Com.             | 5.0         | 11          |
| L'Ulivo +        |             |                     |                       |             |                  | l'Ulivo +     |                     |             |                       |             |             |
| RC               | <b>44.9</b> | 262                 |                       | <b>43.4</b> | 58               | RC            | <b>45.3</b>         | 192         |                       | <b>40.0</b> | 69          |
|                  |             |                     | CCD-CDU               | 5.8         | 12               |               |                     |             | CCD-CDU               | 3.2         | 0           |
|                  |             |                     | Forza Italia          | 20.6        | 37               |               |                     |             | Forza Italia          | 29.5        | 62          |
|                  |             |                     | All. Nazionale        | 15.7        | 28               |               |                     |             | All. Nazionale        | 12.0        | 24          |
| Polo libertà     | 40.3        | 169                 | Total                 | 42.1        | 77               |               |                     |             | Nuovo PSI             | 1.0         | 0           |
| Lega             | 10.8        | 39                  | Lega                  | 10.1        | 20               |               |                     |             | Lega                  | 3.9         | 0           |
| Polo + Lega      | <b>51.1</b> | 208                 |                       | <b>52.2</b> | 97               | Cdl           | <b>45.4</b>         | 282         | Total                 | <b>49.6</b> | 86          |
| Lista Pannella   | 0.2         | 0                   | Pannella              | 1.9         | 0                | Bonino        | 1.3                 | 0           | Bonino                | 2.2         | 0           |
| MSFT             | 1.7         | 0                   | MSFT                  | 0.9         | 0                | MSFT          | 0.3                 | 0           | MSFT                  | 0.4         | 0           |
| Others           | 2.0         | 5                   | Others                | 1.6         | 0                | Italia Valori | 4.1                 | 0           | Italia Valori         | 3.9         | 0           |
|                  |             |                     |                       |             |                  | Dem Eur       | 3.6                 | 0           | Dem Eur               | 2.4         | 0           |
|                  |             |                     |                       |             |                  | Others        | 0.0                 | 1           | Others                | 1.5         |             |
| Total            | 99.9        | 475                 |                       | 100         | 155              | Total         | 100                 | 475         |                       | 100         | 155         |

**Key:**

L'UlivoThe Olive-tree Alliance

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Progressisti   | Progressives ('Progressive' was the label adopted by Communist Refoundation candidates in the single-member colleges at the 1996 election) |
| RC/Rif.Com.    | Communist Refoundation   |
| Polo libertà   | Freedom Alliance   |
| Lega           | Northern League  |
| Lista Pannella | Pannella List  |
| MSFT           | <i>Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore</i> ('Tri-Coloured Flame')   |
| PDS-Sin. Eur.  | <i>Partito Democratico della Sinistra-Sinistra Europea</i> (Democratic Party of the Left-European Left)                                    |
| P. Sardo d'Az. | <i>Partito Sardo d'Azione</i> (Sardinian Action Party)   |
| Verdi          | Greens   |
| PPI            | Italian Popular Party  |
| SVP            | South Tyrolean People's Party  |
| PRI            | Italian Republican Party   |
| RI             | Italian Renewal  |
| CCD            | Christian Democratic Centre  |
| CDU            | Christian Democratic Union   |
| All. Nazionale | National Alliance  |
| Cdl            | <i>Casa delle Libertà</i> (House of Freedoms)  |
| Dem Eur        | <i>Democrazia Europea</i> (European Democracy)   |
| DS             | <i>Democratici di Sinistra</i> (Democrats of the Left)   |
| Margherita     | Daisy  |
| Girasole       | Sunflower  |
| Pdci           | <i>Partito dei Comunisti Italiani</i> (Party of Italian Communists)  |
| Nuovo PSI      | New Socialist Party  |

**Table 2**  
**The Geographical Distribution of the Vote 1996 and 2001 (Chamber proportional vote)**

|           | North |      |        | Centre |      |       | South |      |       | Islands |      |       |
|-----------|-------|------|--------|--------|------|-------|-------|------|-------|---------|------|-------|
|           | 1996  | 2001 | Δ      | 1996   | 2001 | Δ     | 1996  | 2001 | Δ     | 1996    | 2001 | Δ     |
| RC/Pdci   | 7.5   | 6.5  | -13.3  | 11.2   | 7.8  | -30.4 | 9.0   | 6.8  | -24.4 | 7.4     | 5.2  | -29.7 |
| PDS/DS    | 18.6  | 15.6 | -16.1  | 28.6   | 23.2 | -18.8 | 20.9  | 14.9 | -28.7 | 17.6    | 11.8 | -33.0 |
| Girasole  | 2.6   | 2.0  | -23.0  | 2.3    | 1.9  | -17.4 | 2.5   | 3.1  | +24.0 | 2.5     | 1.8  | -28.0 |
| Centre    | 11.5  | 15.1 | +31.0  | 10.2   | 14.8 | +45.1 | 11.4  | 13.3 | +16.7 | 10.9    | 13.8 | +26.6 |
| Total CL  | 40.2  | 39.2 | -2.5   | 52.3   | 47.7 | -8.8  | 43.8  | 38.1 | -13.0 | 38.4    | 32.6 | -15.1 |
| FI        | 20.0  | 29.9 | +49.5  | 15.7   | 24.3 | +54.8 | 22.3  | 30.6 | +37.2 | 29.7    | 35.0 | +17.8 |
| AN        | 11.0  | 9.1  | -17.3  | 22.3   | 16.9 | -24.2 | 19.1  | 14.0 | -26.7 | 16.9    | 11.5 | -32.0 |
| CCD-CDU   | 4.8   | 2.4  | -50.0  | 5.1    | 2.7  | -47.1 | 8.1   | 3.9  | -51.9 | 7.6     | 6.6  | -13.2 |
| Lega      | 20.5  | 8.2  | -60.0  | 0.9    | 0.2  | -77.8 | -     | -    | -     | -       | -    | -     |
| Nuovo PSI | -     | 0.6  | -      | -      | 1.0  | -     | -     | 1.5  | -     | -       | 1.4  | -     |
| Total CR  | 56.3  | 50.2 | -10.8  | 44.0   | 45.1 | +2.5  | 49.5  | 50.0 | +1.0  | 54.2    | 54.5 | +0.6  |
| Others    | 3.5   | 10.6 | +202.9 | 3.7    | 7.2  | +94.6 | 6.7   | 11.9 | +77.6 | 7.4     | 12.9 | +74.3 |

**Key:**

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| RC/Pdci   | Communist Refoundation/Party of Italian Communists |
| PDS/DS    | Democratic Party of the Left/Democrats of the Left |
| Girasole  | Sunflower  |
| CL        | Centre left  |
| FI        | <i>Forza Italia</i> (Go Italy!)                    |
| AN        | <i>Alleanza Nazionale</i> (National Alliance)      |
| CCD       | Christian Democratic Centre                        |
| CDU       | Christian Democratic Union                         |
| Lega      | Northern League                                    |
| Nuovo PSI | New Socialist Party                                |
| CR        | Centre right                                       |

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Fit to Run Italy?', *The Economist*, 28 April 2001, p.17.

<sup>2</sup> P. Daniels, 'Le elezioni del Parlamento europeo del 1999', in M. Gilbert and G. Pasquino (eds), *Politica in Italia. I fatti dell'anno e le interpretazioni*, 2000 edition (Bologna: Mulino, 2000); J.L. Newell, 'Actors at a Dress Rehearsal: The Italian Regional Elections of April 2000', *Regional and Federal Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Autumn 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, G. Pasquino, *Crisi dei partiti e governabilità* (Bologna: Mulino, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed development of these factors see M.J. Bull and J.L. Newell, 'Italian Politics and the 1992 Elections: from 'Stable Instability' to Instability and Change', Vol. 46, No.2, April 1993.

<sup>5</sup> S. Fabbrini, *Tra pressioni e veti. Il cambiamento politico in Italia* (Rome: Laterza, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> M.J. Bull and J.L. Newell, 'Italy Changes Course? The 1994 Elections and the Victory of the Right', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1, January 1995; and J.L. Newell and M.J. Bull, 'The Italian General Election of 1996: the Left on Top or on Tap?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 4, October 1996.

<sup>7</sup> F. Kapner, 'Unemployment falls below 10% in Italy', *Financial Times*, 28 March 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Gilbert, 'The Bassanini Laws: a Half-Way House in Local government Reform', in D. Hine and S. Vassallo (eds), *Italian Politics, op. cit. The Return of Politics* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in J. Blitz, 'OECD urges Italy to cut red tape', *Financial Times*, 4 April 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in J. Blitz, 'Return of Il Cavaliere', 12 March 2001.

<sup>11</sup> J. Blitz, 'Much has changed but growth rate disappoints', *Financial Times*, 15 February 2001.

<sup>12</sup> M. Giannini, 'La lunga marcia del Cavaliere', *La Repubblica*, 15 May 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Shortly after the election, in fact, the Treasury announced a 'hole' in the budget for 2001, meaning a likely budgetary adjustment in the Summer unless there were immediate cuts in public expenditure. The incoming government accused the centre left of hiding this fact before the election so as not to damage its vote ('Conti pubblici, mancano 10 mila miliardi', *Corriere della Sera*, 3 June 2001).

<sup>14</sup> For a trenchant critique of the centre-left experience see G. Pasquino, *Critica della Sinistra Italiana* (Rome: Laterza, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> G. Pasquino, *La transizione a parole* (Bologna: Mulino, 2000), pp. 223-4.

<sup>16</sup> G. Pasquino, 'The Political Context 1996-2001', in J. Newell (ed.) *The Italian General Election of 2001* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> G. Pasquino, *La transizione a parole, op. cit.*, p.223.

<sup>19</sup> G. Pasquino, 'La cosa infinita', *Il Mulino*, Jan-Feb 1998, pp.71-81.

<sup>20</sup> UDEUR (Union of Democrats for Europe) had originally been the Union for a Democratic Republic (UDR, founded on 16 February 1998, formally launched on 10 June 1998, and led by Francesco Cossiga). When Cossiga and Rocco Buttiglione later left the party, it was on the verge of dissolution, but Clemente Mastella renamed it UDEUR on 23 May 1999. UDR had voted against the Prodi government when it fell in 1998. Mention should also be made of *Democrazia Europea*, launched by Sergio d'Antoni (with the backing of former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti) which 'explicitly aimed



---

at winning enough seats to make it impossible for either major political coalition to gain an absolute majority of seats in Parliament' (G. Pasquino, 'The Political Context', *op. cit.*).

<sup>21</sup> The evidence suggests that the assumptions of the 'centrists' are problematic in relation to the positioning of the electorate (see R. Mannheimer and G. Sani, 'Reassembling the Centre and the Electoral Spectrum', in D. Hine and S. Vassallo (eds), *Italian Politics. The Return of Politics* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> 'As long as the rules of the constitutional game appear of dubious quality, are disliked and accepted only by default and remain precarious, no political-institutional transition will come to a positive conclusion.' (G. Pasquino, 'Reforming the Italian Constitution', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1998, p.52).

<sup>23</sup> C. Fusaro, 'The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Italy: A Framework for Analysis', *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn, 1998, p. 72.

<sup>24</sup> G. Pasquino, 'A Postmortem of the Bicamerale', in D. Hine and S. Vassallo (eds), *Italian Politics*, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> G. Pasquino, 'Reforming the Italian Constitution', *op. cit.*, p.43.

<sup>26</sup> M. Gilbert, 'The Bassanini Laws', *op. cit.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>27</sup> M. Giannini, 'La lunga marcia del Cavaliere', *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Una Storia Italiana* (Rome: Mondadori, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> 'Silvio Berlusconi: An Italian Story', *The Economist*, 28 April 2001, pp.23-8.

<sup>30</sup> G. Pasquino, *La transizione a parole*, *op. cit.*, p. 39 (authors' translation). A bill was eventually passed, but only by the Senate so it failed to become law before the dissolution of parliament.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in D. Pacitti, 'Running on a clean-up ticket', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 11 May 2001.

<sup>32</sup> E. Mauro, 'Il cavaliere alla presa del potere', *La Repubblica*, 15 May 2001.

<sup>33</sup> An emergency circular issued by the Interior Ministry at lunchtime allowed those who had already joined a queue to vote beyond the official closing time.

<sup>34</sup> G. Legnante, 'La partecipazione al voto: tendenze e cause', <http://www.polix.it/home/commenti/guidolegnante/3692.html> 15 May 2001.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the 1996 Italian National Election Study (Istituto Carlo Cattaneo, Bologna) reveals that while only 5.6 per cent of those who voted in 1994 and 1996 were voters who switched their Chamber of Deputies proportional vote from a party belonging to one of the two main coalitions to a party belonging to the other, 15.7 per cent - three times as many - were voters who switched to another party within the same coalition.

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed explanation of how the electoral system works see: D. Hine, 'The New Italian Electoral System', *ASMI Newsletter*, no. 24, Autumn 1993, pp.27-33.

<sup>37</sup> R. D'Alimonte and S. Bartolini, 'Electoral Transition and Party System Change in Italy', in M. Bull and M. Rhodes (eds) *Crisis and Transition in Italian Politics* (Frank Cass, 1997), p.116

<sup>38</sup> J.L. Newell and M.J. Bull, 'The April 1996 Italian General Election: The Left on Top or on Tap?', *op. cit.*, pp.634-5

---

<sup>39</sup> We use the expression ‘might have been’ because of course owing to the mechanism of the *scorporo* the plurality and proportional elections are not independent of one another. In theory, for any given level of support in the proportional vote, a larger number of victories in the plurality contest should mean a reduced chance of picking up seats in the proportional contest. So we cannot be certain that wins for the centre-left in all fifty-seven of the seats would have translated precisely into a corresponding number of extra Chamber seats for it. However, given the attempts of both sides to avoid the impact of the *scorporo* by using *liste civetta*, or ‘decoy lists’ (on which, see below), it is not an unreasonable assumption in the present case.

<sup>40</sup> G. Pasquino, ‘The Political Context’, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> L. Magri, ‘Capire per reagire’, *La Rivista del Manifesto*, June 2001, <http://www.larivistadelmanifesto.it/archivio/18/18A20010601.html>

<sup>42</sup> O. Massari and S. Parker, ‘The Two Lefts: Between Rupture and Re-composition’ in D. Hine and S. Vassallo (eds) *Italian Politics: The Return of Politics* (London: Berghahn, 2000), p.58.

<sup>43</sup> See S. Hellman, ‘La sinistra italiana dopo le elezioni del 1996 in R. D’Alimonte and D. Nelken, *Politica in Italia: I fasti dell’anno e le interpretazioni*, 1997 edition (Bologna: Mulino 1997).

<sup>44</sup> O. Massari and S. Parker, ‘The Two Lefts’, *op. cit.*, p.58.

<sup>45</sup> I. McAllister, ‘Keeping them Honest: Public and Elite Perceptions of Ethical Conduct among Australian Legislators’, *Political Studies*, 48, 2000, p.25. For evidence of the limits on the electoral consequences of corruption allegations against politicians, see the chapters on France and Ireland in M.J. Bull and J.L. Newell (eds) *Corruption and Scandal in Contemporary Politics* (London: Palgrave, forthcoming).

<sup>46</sup> E. Mauro, ‘Il cavaliere alla presa del potere’; P. Flores d’Arcais, ‘I paradossi di una sconfitta’, *La primavera di MicroMega*, no. 6, 2001, pp.5-8.

<sup>47</sup> To judge by the most recent elections prior to those of 2001 (that is, the regional elections of April 2000) none would, on their own, survive the four per cent threshold.

<sup>48</sup> L. Magri, ‘Capire per reagire’ *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> J.L. Newell, ‘Italy: the Extreme Right Comes in from the Cold’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3, July 2000, p.482.

<sup>50</sup> M. Cotta, ‘La crisi del governo di partito all’italiana’ in M. Cotta and P. Isernia (eds) *Il gigante dai piedi di argilla* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1996).

<sup>51</sup> A point forcefully made by Paul Ginsborg in ‘Italy, Berlusconi and History’, presentation to Birbeck College, London, 22 May 2001.