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## ***Di lotta e di governo: The Lega Nord and Rifondazione Comunista in coalition***

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### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen the emergence and growth, in a number of European democracies of ‘outsider’ parties. These are parties that are (a) new, (b) radical and even ‘anti-system’, and whose growth enables them to (c) ‘disturb’ the electoral competition and the quest for power of the older established parties. Many of those that fall into the three large categories of new parties to have emerged in recent years – green parties, right-wing populist parties and regional autonomy/sub-state nationalist parties – would qualify for ‘outsider’ status according to these criteria. An interesting question is what happens when the evolution and growth of outsider parties gives them a significance within their party systems such as to lead them to join governments. In other words, what are the consequences for these parties of a shift from opposition to government? In particular, how successful are they in walking the fine line between playing the role of the ‘opposition in government’ (thus reassuring their core electorate that they have not ‘sold out’) and showing that they too can be responsible members of government, capable of governing as effectively as mainstream political actors (thus possibly attracting new support)?

The remainder of this paper seeks to throw light on these questions by analysing, in exploratory fashion, the experience of two outsider parties in Italy: the regionalist populist Lega Nord (LN) and the radical left Rifondazione Comunista (RC). While the Lega’s first experience in coalition government with the centre-right ended swiftly and in acrimony in 1994, the party confounded expectations not only by managing simply to remain in the centre-right Casa delle Libertà government from 2001 to 2006, but by being seen to influence policy and yet maintain its ‘outsider’ identity. Since the victory of the centre-left in April 2006, it has been the turn of RC to attempt the same fine balancing act of being ‘*di lotta e di governo*’ (‘fighting and in government’).

### **The Lega and Rifondazione as ‘outsider’ parties**

The LN clearly qualifies as an ‘outsider’ party because it is both ‘new’ and ‘anti-system’. In fact, the party was founded relatively recently (in 1991), when its leader Umberto Bossi managed to bring together under the leadership of ‘his’ (already quite successful) Lombard League a variety of northern Italian regionalist organisations, all of which had previously been autonomous. Moreover, following in the footsteps of its most successful forebears (the Lega Lombarda and the Liga Veneta), the Lega Nord declared all-out war on the Italian political class *as such* (whether right or left-wing) (Bossi and Vimercati 1992; 1993).

The LN’s main constituency has always been constituted by northern Italians from sub-alpine provincial areas of diffused industrialisation, many of whom formerly voted for the Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) (Diamanti, 1993; 1995; Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001). Throughout the 1980s, as the importance of small-scale industry – the economic model typical of northern Italy – increased, these voters felt increasingly let down by the DC, as the party progressively came to lose its ability to represent their grievances *vis-à-vis* the central state. Moreover, following the ‘Clean Hands’ investigations into political corruption of the beginning of the 1990s (which discredited the entire ‘old’ political class (Newell, 2000a)) and faced with increasing taxation (said to be necessary in order to contain a spiralling public debt), northern Italian voters began to deal and switched to the LN in large numbers. Claiming to be the ‘saviour’ of the people of the North, Umberto Bossi offered redemption from the sins of First Republic Italy by offering ‘his’ Lega as the representative of northern interests and as a radical alternative to the political class ‘of Rome’. The anti-system stance, therefore, has always been at the very core of the political project of the LN.

As for its ideology, the LN does not adhere to any ‘sacred texts’ or recognised body of theoretical work (besides constantly referring to the ‘holy grail’ of a never well-specified ‘federalism’); indeed its principles and values appear to have been in constant flux and difficult to pin down, since the very beginning (Diamanti, 1995). Unlike the case of RC, given how centralised the LN is (as we will see below), congresses have in reality been little more than mere showcases. By attending them, mid-rank functionaries have had the opportunity to offer their support to decisions already taken by the party

leadership (and often, as in the case of the abandonment of the separatist project in 1998, even already *made public* through the party's own media).

We regard the LN as, first and foremost, a 'regionalist populist' party (McDonnell, 2006): 'regionalist', since it arose in a specific political and socio-economic environment and its elaboration of themes is still developed, first and foremost, with reference to this territorial context, i.e. its heartland of northern Italy (Cento Bull and Gilbert, 2001); 'populist' because, in addition to being a very centralised party, as we said above, the discourse of the LN constantly pits a virtuous, homogeneous people against a set of self-serving '*poteri forti*' ('powers that-be', i.e. politicians, the finance world, etc.) which are said to be conspiring all the time to deprive citizens of what is rightfully theirs, as well as suppressing their values, their voice and their very identity (on the definition of 'populism', see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007).

RC qualifies for 'outsider' status in a different way. First, it is 'new' less in the sense of being 'novel' (it is, after all, a member of the long-established family of communist parties) than in the sense of being of 'recent origin'. It is 'new' in much the same way that the parties emerging in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism are 'new' – in that its emergence was bound up with the processes of political change that led to the collapse of Italy's traditional governing parties and the emergence of a new, bipolar, party system.

Second, as a party that was born of opposition to the 1989 decision of Achille Occhetto to pursue the project of transforming the Italian Communist Party (PCI) into a non-communist party with a new name, and as a party that also came quickly to encompass much of the 'new left', with its extra-parliamentary and revolutionary tendencies of various stripes (when Proletarian Democracy, aware that its own available space would be squeezed by the new party, took the decision to merge with it), it is radical and even anti-system.

Third, RC was from the beginning able to 'disturb' the electoral competition and quest for power of the other parties by virtue of being strong enough to affect competition among the remaining parties (that is, it had 'blackmail potential' in Sartorian (1976) terms) while remaining unavailable for government formation (that is, it lacked 'coalition potential'). The party's ability materially to affect the outcome of competition between

the remaining actors in the system has been neatly illustrated by Roberto D'Alimonte and Stefano Bartolini (1997) who have calculated, for each of the single-member Chamber constituencies for the 1994 and 1996 general elections, the difference in the votes obtained by coalitions' candidates, and the sum of proportional votes obtained by the parties fielding the candidates. These calculations suggest that at both elections, significant numbers of voters supporting centre-left parties with their proportional votes were however unwilling to support, with their majoritarian votes, the coalition's candidates when these candidates were drawn from RC – an effect that was much smaller or else ran in the opposite direction when the candidates were drawn from other parties. The importance of this, in a context in which three-quarters of the seats were distributed according to the plurality formula, does not need emphasising.

With regard to RC's lack of coalition potential, it was of course regularly part of *electoral* coalitions from 1994. But these coalitions were just that. Even as a potential partner in a *legislative* coalition, never mind as a potential *government* partner its ability to coalesce was strictly limited. On the one hand, many in the party saw the 1991 PCI split as marking the emergence in Italy of 'two lefts' (Massari and Parker, 2000) – one with a governing, the other with an oppositional vocation – from which it inferred a need continuously to mark the differences in identity between RC and the more moderate Democratic Party of the Left (PDS).<sup>1</sup> Hence, in the period after 1994, the party was never able to make itself available for the construction of majorities in support of a government or potential government without suffering the risk or the actuality of an internal split.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, external circumstances – the attitudes of other parties – also placed limits on RC's coalition potential. Thus, the Ulivo that made its electoral debut in 1996

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<sup>1</sup> It was a perspective whose assumptions were, perhaps, most clearly articulated by the position on alliances taken by the Trotskyist component at RC's second congress in January 1994 when it argued that 'As communists, we do not sacrifice our political autonomy, our alternative proposals, to mere electoral calculations. We are not in politics to win votes, rather we ask for votes in support of a policy. An election campaign is not an end in itself but an opportunity for us to present our programme ... An institutional presence is not the goal of our activity, but only a means – however important – to support workers' struggles as well as a platform for the constant and intransigent denunciation of bourgeois policies' (quoted by Bertolino, 2004: 96).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, after the first Berlusconi government fell and the party found its votes indispensable to the support of an alternative government, its parliamentary contingent was divided in the votes of confidence giving birth to the Dini government, some leaving shortly thereafter to form the Comunisti Unitari. And while its parliamentary contingent gave critical support to the incoming Prodi government in 1996, by the autumn of

excluded RC in part on the insistence of some of the actors located near the centre of the political spectrum – with the result that the coalition (Ulivo + RC) that defeated Berlusconi and the centre-right that year was not a coalition for government at all but a mere electoral alliance: an expedient arising from the nature of the electoral system, allowing RC to keep high in the campaign the profile of its separate identity.

The 1998 breakaway of the PdCI confirmed RC's outsider status by bringing about the departure of those most ready to bow to the pressures of bi-polar electoral competition, to give priority to alliance with the remainder of the centre left and to look to the institutions of Parliament and government as the preferred terrain of political contest. In departing RC they left behind those most sensitive to the idea of an oppositional vocation for the party, those for whom alliances were to be subordinate to programmatic questions and who looked at least as much to civil society as to the institutions as the preferred terrain of political contest.

### **The Lega Nord and its moves in and out of government**

As an anti-system regionalist and populist party, a key dilemma which the LN has inevitably had to grapple constantly with is this: should it (a) protest from a political and geographical 'periphery', in splendid isolation, retaining its 'purity', but leaving itself open to eventually appearing irrelevant in the eyes of voters? Or should it (b) participate in coalition with other parties, possibly in central government, thus gaining influence over policy, but risking a loss of credibility and support amongst its grassroots due to its association with the 'political elite' and the necessary compromises of coalition government? The 'schizophrenic' behaviour of the LN in 1994, when it agreed to join a government majority for the first time only to turn itself into an 'enemy within' of such government in a matter of weeks, originates precisely from the party's inability to find convincing answers to this question.

In many ways, the general elections of 1994 seemed to vindicate the LN's decision to ally itself to Silvio Berlusconi's newly-formed Forza Italia (FI). Not only did the LN secure 8.4 per cent of the vote (nationally), but, more importantly, it also

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1998 it was no longer able to do so in a united fashion, this leading to the breakaway of the Party of Italian Communists (PdCI).

managed to send 180 MPs to Rome (thanks to a highly advantageous seat agreement in the north with Berlusconi's FI, which gave the LN a vastly inflated number of seats) (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

However, almost from the moment it took office, the government was wracked by infighting between the allies, particularly the LN and FI. Clashes were rich and frequent over the summer months. When the Minister of Justice, Alfredo Biondi, proposed a decree modifying the legislation on preventive custody for corruption offences, soon to be opposed by the anti-corruption magistrates of the 'Clean Hands' team, the LN distanced itself from the initiative and attacked the government (Guarnieri, 1997: 169). Furthermore, shortly after the summer, Berlusconi's attempt to reform the pension system by decree again encountered harsh opposition from the LN. Following several months of infighting during which the LN constantly and relentlessly attacked the Prime Minister (Diamanti, 1995: 138), on 21 December 1994 Silvio Berlusconi preferred to offer his resignation rather than facing a confidence vote which he would have inevitably lost.

The most important factor intervening between the general elections of 27 March 1994 and the end of that experience of government, however, had not been Berlusconi's excessive zeal for reform, but rather the European elections in June. As Table 1 shows, on that occasion the LN saw its support drop considerably, which confirmed the party's fears that it was entering a phase of decline. In fact, support for the LN had already shrunk at the March 1994 general election, mainly due to competition by FI. On that occasion, however, the loss of votes had been masked by the large number of MPs it had gained. Two months later, at the European elections, however, FI significantly increased its vote (to 30 percent) while the LN's share declined to 6 percent. The party had thus lost about a quarter of its vote in a two-month period.

In short, the LN was running the risk of becoming irrelevant in the eyes of voters by letting itself be perceived as a secondary player at the court of Berlusconi. Analysis of the vote shows that large numbers of northern Italians were indeed migrating from the

LN to FI in this period, possibly attracted by Berlusconi's image as the successful (and northern) self-made man (Biorcio, 1997: 78).

Following this first experience in government, between 1996 and 1998 the LN radicalised its position and embraced the cause of northern independence, arguing that the North, now renamed as 'Padania', had a right to secede from the rest of the country and set itself free from the influence of Rome. At the 1997 congress, the party changed its name to 'League for the Independence of Padania', while the leader, Umberto Bossi, further tightened his grip on the party by making sure that its regional branches could not act of their own free will (by making alliances with the right in regional or local administrations, for instance). Despite its excellent performance in the 1996 general elections – which saw the LN crossing the 10 percent threshold nationally for the first (and only) time in its history – the 'secessionist Lega' found itself completely isolated, i.e. with no opportunities to bring about change. Moreover, while the party had certainly performed beyond expectations in electoral terms, its growth was still confined to those areas in which it had always been strong (Diamanti, 2003). Having alienated itself from the right, a stable alliance with the left was also impossible (despite a brief flirtation with the major parties of the centre-left), due to the party's radicalisation, its conversion to separatism and its vociferous (some would say racist) anti-immigration rhetoric.

Having spent almost three years all dressed up but with nowhere to go, on 14 September 1998 Bossi addressed a gathering of party militants at the now traditional end-of-summer appointment in Venice and candidly admitted that the isolationist strategy had not paid off. The movement needed to find allies in order to survive (Passalacqua, 1998). It was the beginning of a process of slow and yet inevitable *rapprochement* with the centre-right. Following the party's disastrous performance in the 1999 European elections, the LN was thus handed a lifeline as the other centre-right parties accepted the fact that, although weakened, the LN could still help them defeat the centre-left in northern constituencies at the next general election of 2001 and brought it back into the coalition.



## RC's moves towards government

In many ways, RC's journey to government was much more straightforward than the LN's. That said, it cannot be explained in terms of any simple thesis of 'ideological de-radicalisation' – as is confirmed by a comparison of the theses approved by the fifth national congress (4-7 April 2002) with the resolution winning majority support at the sixth (3-6 March 2005), where the decision to seek 'a coalition of forces... for a government in which RC and the forces of the alternative left are present as members' was officially sanctioned: for both congresses confirmed the party's strategic choice to situate the locus of its activity 'in society, in class conflict and in the social movements, rather than in the institutions and in the relationship between political forces'.<sup>3</sup> Thereby, they confirmed that office seeking was not – at least in the party's own perception – among its primary goals – whereas an enhanced role for office seeking was just the obvious consequence to expect of any process of ideological 'de-radicalisation'.

No, what brought RC into government was quite simply its projected electoral performance given the nature of the electoral system and the party system. In essence, the predominantly majoritarian character of the electoral system at the time of the 2005 congress and the increasingly entrenched bi-polar character of the Italian party system meant that some kind of alliance with the remainder of the centre-left, however deep the programmatic disagreements, must have seemed 'obligatory'. Without an agreement, the party risked heavy vote losses, not to say the possibility of electoral meltdown:

- where two coalitions are competing in every constituency for an overall majority of parliamentary seats, the only situation in which the rational voter will support a third party is one where that party is among the two best placed in his/her constituency and is ideologically closer to his/her most liked than to his/her least liked coalition. The results of the election of 2001, when RC fielded its own independent candidates in the single-member colleges for the Senate contest, confirmed that not even in the red belt regions (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany,

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<sup>3</sup> These are the words of 'The societal alternative', the resolution winning majority support at the sixth congress (authors' translation).

Umbria, Marche) was there a Senate college where the party came anywhere near to fulfilling the first of the conditions.

- The party and electoral system-based *theoretical* pressures on voters to cast a rational vote have been joined by *empirical* pressures deriving from broader processes of post-war social change that have weakened voters' long-term commitments to parties. They include increasing urbanisation along with rising levels of education and of geographical and social mobility. And the party already had available the evidence of the effects of these processes in the form of the results of the 2001 election which clearly demonstrated the presence of rational voting among its followers: Among those whose vote in the Chamber proportional arena went to RC and were old enough to vote for the Senate as well as the Chamber, 30.9 per cent cast their Senate vote for the Ulivo,<sup>4</sup> rather than sticking with a party whose votes risked bringing defeat for the Ulivo to the advantage of the centre-right in that arena.
- The aforementioned processes of social change have in turn acted upon the party and its membership, leaving it unable to do much itself to inculcate any long-term commitment among its followers and thus to protect itself from the electoral consequences of strategic shifts: its capacities come nowhere near to those of the PCI, which was able, in some parts of the country, to sustain loyalty by acting as the pillar of an entire political subculture. One indicator of RC's weakness in this respect is the ratio of its membership (itself in a state of long-term decline) to its voters.<sup>5</sup> While the PCI had about twenty members for every hundred voters, RC struggles to manage five: Table 2. If the ratio of members to voters can be taken as an indicator of the importance of party organisation to electoral mobilisation, then RC's relatively low ratio arguably suggests that it must rely for its support on rather weakly attached voters that it will struggle to 'encapsulate'.

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<sup>4</sup> Italian National Election Study data, 2001

<sup>5</sup> Another indicator is the very high turnover of the membership – losses being of the order of 15 per cent per year – where failures to renew membership appear to come far more from the organisational difficulties involved in re-contacting the previous year's subscribers than from political disagreements (for details see Bertolino, 2004: 188-194).

- Weakly encapsulated voters are by definition ones more open to the influence of contingent political circumstances and the political debates of the moment as conducted through the national media. In the run-up to the 2006 election, the strongly bi-polar character of competition and the lack of legitimacy accorded by each coalition to the other makes it seem reasonable to guess that for the majority of voters of whatever hue, the priority of priorities will have been the defeat or confirmation in office of the then incumbent government and its prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. Under these circumstances, RC arguably risked considerable public hostility and corresponding vote losses, if, through an independent stance, it weakened the forces opposed to the entrepreneur.

[Table 2 about here]

But why would a strongly ideological party, such as RC, be especially interested in its performance in the electoral arena anyway? After all, it contained not insignificantly sized minority factions that argued precisely that electoral considerations were subordinate to far larger goals (note 1) and even the majority surrounding party secretary Bertinotti was, as we have seen, of the view that informal and non-institutional forms of political struggle took precedence over formal and institutional forms of activity. The answer has to do with: the degree of centralisation of internal decision making; the relationship between the party's internal components; the way the party is financed:

- Besides having considerable organisational and financial autonomy, RC's basic units – its branches or *circoli* – are aligned with one or other of the internal factions, a characteristic that reflects the origins of the party as the coming together of a variety of political leaders each with their own organisational and political resources and geographical power bases. In turn, factional competition, running from the top to the bottom of the party, has effectively prevented the emergence of strong central leadership capable of simply imposing decisions on the entire party. If this was a difficulty for party secretary Bertinotti in taking his party into alliance with the centre left in the run-up to 2006, then by exactly the same token, it was a difficulty for the more radical factions that wanted the party

to turn its back on the centre left, simply because none of them could command a majority.<sup>6</sup>

- In the party's relationship with its surrounding environment, the role of the party on the ground is small: in 2001, only twenty percent of the *circoli* had in excess of 100 members and while the *circoli* retain control of most of the resources generated through membership dues, subscriptions and so on, those deriving from the laws providing for the public funding of parties are controlled centrally (Bertolino, 2004: 214, 315-27). The central party organisation, on the other hand, has been growing in size since the party's foundation (Bertolino, 2004: 277-8) and this growth has been part of a gradually increasing level of professionalisation throughout the party organisation, where this increase has been heavily dependent on the party's success in getting its candidates elected to public office – the point being that election to office brings with it some form of remuneration and thus the possibility to be at least a *semi*-professional politician. This means that the party is heavily dependent, for the quality of the human resources available to it and therefore for its political impact, on the efficacy of the electoral strategies it chooses to adopt.
- It is every bit as dependent on such strategies for the financial resources available to it; for approximately two thirds of its income comes from the state, and the level of public funding available to parties is perfectly correlated with their vote totals (Newell, 2000b: 77).

All this leaves a final question, however: Bertinotti was seeking not just an electoral arrangement with the remainder of the centre left, but recognition as a potential

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<sup>6</sup> At the sixth congress in 2005, debate revolved around five resolutions three of which were hostile to the idea of alliance with centre left. The first was presented by a coalition of forces led by Bertinotti and won 59 percent. The second, 'To be communists', was presented by the faction surrounding the journal, *l'Ernesto*, and won 26 percent. (This faction consists of those with leanings towards the positions taken by former party president Cossutta, and who distinguish themselves from the *Bertinottiani* above all by their much more positive view of the experience of communism in the twentieth century). The third resolution, 'For a communist project' was presented by the faction surrounding the Trotskyist, Marco Ferrando and won 6.9 per cent. The fourth, 'Another refoundation is possible', was presented by the 'Critical Left' (*Sinistra Critica*) or *Erre* faction (another Trotskyist grouping, led by Luigi Malabarba), and won 6.5 percent. The fifth resolution, 'Break with Prodi', was presented by the faction surrounding the journal *FalceMartello* ('Hammer and Sickle') and won 1.6 percent. (This faction identifies with the international tendency, 'Committee for a Marxist International', formerly led by the British Trotskyist, Ted Grant).

governing partner on the basis of a negotiated platform. Even the sixth congress resolutions most critical of Bertinotti's position were prepared to contemplate some form of purely *electoral* accommodation – provided it involved no programmatic compromise or prior commitment as to the party's stance in the aftermath of the election. So why did RC end up taking a position one of whose effects was to heighten its internal divisions? The answer is this: In the first place, if RC's location in the Italian party system gives it considerable power of blackmail vis-à-vis the centre left, then this also works the other way round, especially given what we have said above. To suggest a purely *electoral* arrangement with the centre left was to make the highly questionable assumption that the centre left would *accept* such an arrangement without demanding, in return, from RC, some form of prior commitment regarding the positions it would take after the election. In the second place, all the pressures that, we have argued, were pushing RC in this direction anyway, will have been augmented by the changed electoral law that was rushed through Parliament in December 2005. As a closed list system of proportional representation with a majority premium it increased the incentives to parties to field their candidates as coalitions by removing the problem of the summability of votes.<sup>7</sup> This in turn meant that for each of the two coalitions, victory or defeat in the election depended more than ever before on outdoing the opposing coalition in the breadth of the forces it was able to bring together. This made it likely, as in fact happened, that third forces outside either of the two main coalitions would essentially be very few and almost entirely ignored by the media in the campaign. The new law obliged parties and coalitions to present electoral programmes so that from then on there could be no question of RC coming to an electoral arrangement with the remainder of the centre left *outside* of the context of programmatic discussions and agreement. And finally, the proportional dimension to the new law held out the prospect, given its poll ratings, that in coalition with the centre left, RC would achieve an unprecedented tally of seats. This too

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<sup>7</sup> The previous law placed parties under pressure to field joint candidates in single-member constituencies while also forcing them to consider whether the addition of an extra partner to the coalition would increase or decrease the coalition's vote total. If there were parties intensely disliked by the supporters of other parties in the coalition, then it was reasonable to suppose that those supporters might refuse to support a joint candidate drawn from the disliked party. This was the problem of the summability of votes, a problem that ceased to exist with the new law by virtue of the fact that it enabled the formation of electoral coalitions without the need for parties to agree on joint candidates thus allowing voters to support a

came to pass and its consequence was to make RC support indispensable to the survival in office of the government that kissed hands in the election's aftermath. We turn to the implications of this after having explored, in the following section, the LN's experience in government.

### **The Lega Nord in the Berlusconi governments of 2001-2006**

Following the Casa delle libertà (CDL) victory in 2001, it quickly became apparent that the position and role of the LN in the new centre-right coalition presented a number of important differences compared to 1994. Firstly, of course, the LN now had a significantly weaker electoral mandate and far fewer deputies than it had gained on that occasion. This decline in its vote and parliamentary representation was offset, however, by the second major apparent difference: the privileged relationship which Bossi seemed now to enjoy with FI Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and the Finance Minister, Giulio Tremonti (who had helped bring the LN back into the centre-right fold and is perceived as being very close to the party). As tales of the three men meeting for Monday evening dinners seemed to indicate, the new government was divided into two main groups: the 'northern inner circle' of the three 'non-traditional' politicians from Lombardy: Berlusconi, Bossi and Tremonti, and the so-called 'sub-government' made up of 'old professional politicians', the former Christian Democrats of the UDC and the post-Fascists of the National Alliance (AN), perceived as being 'pro-South' and sympathetic to the public sector (Diamanti, 2005). The LN thus became part of an axis which, at least in appearance, was the main driving force for much of the second Berlusconi government. In return for his support for devolution and refusal to condemn the party's more controversial stances and comments, Berlusconi received unswerving backing from the LN on issues of personal interest to him such as reform of the justice system. In other instances (e.g. the chain of events and statements leading to Foreign Minister Renato Ruggiero's resignation in January 2002), one had the impression that Bossi was acting as Berlusconi's rotweiler, with the LN leader helpfully barking and biting where his master could not.

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coalition without having to cast a vote for a candidate drawn from a party other than their most preferred party.

Unlike 1994, therefore, by singling out Berlusconi as his ally in contrast to the traditional politicians within the government, Bossi struck on a combination of friends and enemies within the CDL which allowed him to respect the LN's populist regionalist 'outsider' identity while also at least appearing to have the Prime Minister's ear and thus influence over government policy. Given this strong support for Berlusconi, the LN could only now play its 'opposition within government' role by publicly fighting with its fellow junior coalition partners of the UDC and AN and the LN spent much of its five years in government fighting with these parties, with Berlusconi taking on the public role of peacemaker and 'broker' between them all (Hopkin, 2004).

Similarly, for its strategy of keeping one foot in and one foot out of government to be successful, representatives of the LN of course could not be seen to have become part of the professional political elite in Rome, whether in terms of the linguistic register adopted by the party's ministers in interviews, their perceived attachment to the perks of office, overly friendly relations with non-Lega government colleagues and so on. We can see examples of this approach in the crude language of Bossi ('*Case ai milanesi. No ai bingo bongo*' – 'Give houses to the locals rather than the immigrants', December 2003) or the jumping up and down of Justice Minister Roberto Castelli along with young militants of the Lega to the words of '*chi non salta italiano è!*' 'if you don't jump with us, you are Italian!', outside Parliament in 2004 (see *la Repubblica*, 4 December 2003; *Il Corriere della Sera*, 18 March 2004). In addition, like all populists, the party's ministers strived to portray themselves as 'reluctant politicians' (Taggart, 2000: 61), who would much rather be at home in the provincial North than amongst the despised 'political class' in the capital. Thus, for example, when asked by *La Padania* in 2005 how he liked life in Rome, the LN Minister for Welfare, Roberto Maroni, replied that it was something that had always irritated him because, in his view 'Rome is the home of politics conducted in corridors, in the drawing rooms of the elite: it is the hushed politics of hidden plots' (*La Padania*, 19 June 2005).

However 'reluctantly', the party remained in government for the full five years and has been able to preserve a distinct identity within the CDL alliance. Not only that, but it was able to establish a certain 'issue ownership' and high visibility on questions regarding immigration (particularly Islamic), constitutional reform (particularly

devolution), protectionism (mainly against Chinese products), the Euro and the European integration process (with the LN vehemently against the single currency and both widening and deepening of the integration process). The party was thus able to put some clear green water between it and its coalition partners and yet appear at the right hand side of the Prime Minister. Berlusconi also profited from his closeness to a party that doggedly and vociferously protected him from the various 'leaders in waiting' within government and whose ministers such as Castelli (Justice) helped him to pursue his personal interests.

For its part, the LN was generally content with gaining symbolic or mixed victories on some issues and loudly proclaiming its opposition to others. Examples of the former include:

1. Devolution. The passing of the devolution bill as part of the government's constitutional reform package in the Senate on 23 March 2005 was hailed by the Lega as marking the most significant step yet towards the achievement of its main stated aim in government, as the regions would acquire exclusive legislative competence on matters of public health, local policing and education. For all its undoubted symbolic importance to the party, and despite the LN's success in making sure the reform would be pushed through Parliament, this change to the constitution has now been rejected by voters in a referendum (held in June 2006). Moreover, even if it had managed to pass the referendum hurdle, it could not have been operationalised without a fiscal federalism reform (*la Repubblica*, 21 March 2005), so it was already, from the beginning, a rather 'half-baked' reform.
2. The Bossi-Fini immigration law, which included headline grabbing measures such as the fingerprinting of immigrants. Despite its apparent toughness, this was accompanied by an amnesty which legalised more immigrant workers (700,000) than the amnesties of the Dini (1995) and Prodi (1998) governments put together (Colombo and Sciortino, 2003). According to Ferruccio Pastore (2004), with the exception of the 1986 US amnesty, this was the largest ever of its type in the world. Under Berlusconi in fact the number of foreigners living in Italy illegally has not diminished (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004).



Examples of the latter include loudly proclaiming the party's opposition to Turkey's accession to the EU (a stance which faced widespread opposition within the centre-right alliance itself, let alone the opposing coalition); or the visceral opposition to major public works in the South, which was one of the key promises made to southern voters by Silvio Berlusconi. In actually *affecting government policies*, therefore, the LN's success must be described as limited. The LN, however, has arguably been much more successful in helping to change the political culture. That Italian regions should bear more responsibility and should be granted more autonomy is now widely accepted, and many now agree that 'foreigner' and 'criminal' are synonymous. This has got less to do with having been in government, though, and more with the impact of *leghismo*, as a culture, on Italian society.

#### **RC in Prodi's government of 2006 -**

RC's experience in government has been in sharp contrast to that of the LN. Like the latter, it too has attempted to keep one foot in and one foot out of government – by, for example, supporting the 2007 Finance Law (which, in its own words, was 'not the flower in the government's buttonhole' (Mauro, 2007)), while also publicly supporting strike action against some of the effects of that law (Calculli, 2007).<sup>8</sup> However, it has been able to play nothing of the high-profile and assertive role that the LN was able to play in the Berlusconi government. For example, when in January 2007, the Government announced its decision to accede to US requests for expansion of its military installations in Vicenza, RC participated in demonstrations against a decision that touched directly on one of its 'flagship' themes (peace and anti-militarism). However, RC ministers and other senior figures were notable for the 'softly, softly' approach they took to the unrest: when asked in a *Repubblica* interview whether he would participate in the 17 February demonstration, RC's minister of Social Affairs, Paolo Ferrero, replied simply that he hadn't decided. This was after stating that when he attended, shortly after the Government took office, the funerals of two Italian soldiers who had been killed in Iraq, he had taken off the pacifist badge he always wore because he didn't want it 'to seem somehow offensive' (Lopapa,

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<sup>8</sup> We are referring here to its support for the national teachers' strike called for 16 April 2007.

2007). Meanwhile, the party's most senior figure, Fausto Bertinotti himself, was, by his own acknowledgement, clearly staying within the limits of expression imposed by his role as president of the Chamber of Deputies – limits of which he receives frequent public reminders<sup>9</sup> – when he commented obliquely that ‘All actions that serve to promote peace, including those that prevent new forms of military organisation and military presence are a good thing’ (Rifondazione, 2007).

At first sight such caution might seem strange. After all, superficially, at least, RC was in a much stronger position when entering government than the LN was when it entered government in 2001: whereas the LN, as we have mentioned, took office having suffered a considerable decline in its vote and in its level of parliamentary representation, the reverse was true for RC. Indeed, thanks to the December 2005 electoral law which, as we have seen, was one of the imperatives driving it into office in the first place, RC achieved its highest number of deputies and senators ever, and it was numerically essential to the government's survival (which the League was not). Paradoxically, however, this weakened RC's position not strengthened it, and here lies the most important single reason for the difference in the profile taken by the two parties: because the LN was not essential for Berlusconi's survival, but had the sympathetic ear of the Prime Minister and was one of just four parties, its histrionic leader could well *afford* to expostulate and pick fights with his cabinet colleagues morning, noon and night. The problem for RC is that it is one of *nine* parties *all* of whom are essential to the survival of the Government, so that, every time it raises its voice over this or that issue, it immediately *also* raises the spectre of Government collapse. It was for this reason, and not for some strange and unaccountable sympathy for parliamentarians of the centre right, that in July 2006, Bertinotti could be found proposing that a way be found to broaden the base of the government's majority – and why, in early March 2007, he echoed Giuliano Amato in suggesting that the Government might rely on ‘variable’ majorities in Parliament (Passarini, 2007). Such solutions would *strengthen* RC's position *not* weaken it, for they would restore to the party some autonomy by relieving it of the burden of responsibility for the Government's survival. The fact is that RC is terrified of bringing

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the editorial by Eugenio Scalfari (2006) in *la Repubblica* on 27 December 2006.

down the Government because of what it would mean in terms of reminders of 1998 when the decision of a minority of its deputies (in accordance with the decision of the party's National Political Committee) not to support the Government in a confidence motion buried Prodi's first administration. Then, the split with the *Cossuttiani* that was the direct consequence of this vote had led to the loss of 21 of 34 deputies, 8 of 11 senators, 36 of 62 regional councillors, 22 of 117 provincial secretaries and 4 of 20 regional secretaries. Between 1998 and the following year, membership dropped by 20,995, the number of branches by 371. The split brought the departure, in disproportionate numbers, of the most professionalised of its cadres; it meant that the party now had a direct competitor (the PdCI) in an area of the political spectrum it had once monopolised; it saw its share of the vote decline from 8.6 percent in 1996 to 4.3 percent in the 1999 European elections (Bertolino, 2004: 125-127).

In fact, RC's electoral support had arguably begun to decline *before* and not *after* its 1998 decision (Reds, nd) and may well therefore have been a *cause* rather than a *consequence* of it. This therefore illustrates the other horn of the dilemma in which RC finds itself – for if it risks losing support by raising its voice and jeopardising the Government, then it *also* risks support – that of its most radical supporters – if it *fails* to do so. The point is well illustrated by some of the comments that rapidly began to appear on the Internet in the period following 21 February 2007, the day of Prodi's recent resignation. This came about after the Government lost, in the Senate, a vote on an important foreign policy motion as a result of the decision of two of its nominal supporters – Fernando Rossi (recently departed from the PdCI) and Franco Turigliatto of RC – to abstain. Prodi was sent by President Napolitano back to Parliament where he won a Senate confidence vote a week later. But the event led to Turigliatto's swift expulsion from RC,<sup>10</sup> and party Secretary Franco Giordano's acid denunciations of the senator's abstention as an action not against the Government (which had survived) but against RC (Mauro, 2007b). Just one blog post will have to suffice to illustrate the reaction:

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<sup>10</sup> Turigliatto had said during the course of the parliamentary debate that he would support the motion if Foreign Secretary, Massimo D'Alema, had indicated a willingness to engage in dialogue with the Vicenza protestors. D'Alema said that he intended to say nothing about Vicenza, which was being dealt with by the Interior Minister (*la Repubblica*, 2007).

Rifondazione has been embalmed. Incapable of reacting to any of the attacks of the centrists. Full of hang-ups. It's afraid that all its actions might bring a governmental crisis, but until now nothing of what has been proposed by Rifondazione has been discussed, the CPT are still in place, the Bossi-Fini law is still in force, the Biagi law continues to damage the lives of millions of workers, educational reform is not discussed, the PACS have become DICO but no one says anything, infrastructural projects are being re-proposed by a di Pietro out of control, not to mention the war... For the sake of keeping Prodi on his feet, Rifondazione is prepared to expel even its senators. Between Rifondazione and the social movements a chasm is opening up. Rifondazione does not represent them any more. Words of an active member. What's the point of keeping alive a government that pursues the policies of the right?<sup>11</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the period since the 2006 election has seen various splits in the party. In April 2006, part of the 'Communist Project' faction (note 6) left the party to give birth to the Party of the Communist Alternative. In May it was the turn of the remainder of 'Communist Project' – which followed Marco Ferrando out of the party to found the Movement for the Workers' Communist Party. Finally, in November 2006, a third, and smaller split took place, when a small group of ex-Communist Project sympathisers left the party to found the Communist Unity Association. Although none of the splits were especially serious and none led to the departure of any parliamentarians, they were all fundamentally motivated by discontent with the 'governing drift' of RC and were therefore symptomatic of significant tensions within the party. This should not be a cause of surprise, for on a range of issues, from Afghanistan, to the Finance Law, pensions reform and the Government's proposals concerning civil partnerships, RC has been obliged to support measures it is unhappy with or which fall far short of what it would like.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://partigianamente.splinder.com/post/11297256>

## Conclusion

Unlike the case of RC, we do not believe that some *projected* electoral performance in the short term convinced Bossi to go back into coalition. If anything, the general election of 1996, fought by the LN in splendid isolation, proved that, in terms of support, the LN could do well by keeping to itself, at least, as we have just said, in the short term. With the voting system in Italy having been largely majoritarian between 1993 and 2005, a party whose support was all concentrated in specific areas (in this case, the sub-alpine region) had an opportunity to keep prevailing in a considerable number of constituencies even on its own. As the leader of the Lega Lombarda (now a regional branch of the LN) Giancarlo Giorgetti confirmed to one of the authors of this paper, the leadership of the party is firmly convinced that by being a member of the centre-right alliance the Lega is in fact alienating very many potential voters of the ‘deep north’<sup>12</sup>. However, if in 1994 the LN was concerned about surrendering defence of the North to the newly formed FI, then after the experience of 1996-1998 the party realised that no form of autonomy whatever for the regions of the North could ever be achieved without the backing of a large alliance of forces within the national parliament. Moreover, it realised that, within the bipolar system of competition, to remain in opposition *outside* the two main groupings was to risk becoming irrelevant in the eyes of voters both due to the lesser media visibility it attracted and because of its obvious inability to affect change at government level. While bipolarisation in Italy may not have significantly reduced the number of parties competing, it has made life far more difficult for those who do not wish to link themselves in some way to either the centre-left or centre-right coalition. Likewise, bipolarisation and the slim electoral gap between centre-right and centre-left have forced the two coalitions to include parties which, otherwise, it would happily do without.

The main similarity between RC and the LN is the professionalisation of their political class. There has always been a tension within the LN between the die-hard grassroots activists of the movement and its high-ranking institutional representatives, pejoratively termed by some members as the ‘*partito delle auto blu*’: the party of the blue

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<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted by Daniele Albertazzi in the centre of the Lega Lombarda (Milan), on 25 June 2004.

(official) cars. Indeed, it was by exploiting this fault line within the LN and by presenting himself as the one true interpreter of the people's will that Bossi reasserted his position as party leader in the mid-1990s when his dominance of the movement was called into question after the divisive experience of government. Although the representatives of the LN must not be seen to have become part of 'Rome', unlike more 'flash-in-the-pan' movements such as the Pim Fortyyn List (Lucardie, 2007) the LN arrived at its second governmental appointment with a political class of MPs, MEPs and sub-national representatives who have enjoyed power and its trappings for many years. Therefore, by showing itself to be unable to deliver some form of autonomy for the North and by sliding into irrelevance, the party would have condemned those for whom political activity is now the principal source of employment and income to renounce their ambitions for good.

So much for what brought the parties into government. As far as their experience in government itself is concerned, as RC has been in government for only ten months, it is as yet too early to draw any firm conclusions, but our impression is that in terms of the variable that interests us – remaining in government and influencing policy while maintaining an outsider image and electoral following – the LN has so far, broadly speaking, shown itself to be the more successful of the two parties. Unlike in 1994, this time around it successfully played the role of 'opposition in government', a position which, to some extent, was encouraged by Forza Italia as part of a division of labour within the coalition. In electoral terms, the strategy would appear to have been successful as, after five years in a government whose performance especially on the economic front gave rise to widespread disillusion and disappointment (Guarnieri and Newell, 2005; Newell, 2006), the Lega nonetheless saw its vote share increase by almost a fifth, from 3.9 to 4.6. This is in stark contrast to other populist parties in Western Europe, such as the LPF in Holland or the FPÖ in Austria, whose vote sharply declined after periods of government participation. Thus we can say that the Lega seems to have learned a useful lesson from its previous experience in 1994 in how to project a dual identity of being both 'di lotta' and 'di governo'. Indeed, while Yves Mény and Yves Surel (2002: 18) asserted that 'populist parties are by nature neither durable nor sustainable parties of government. Their fate is to be integrated into the mainstream, to disappear, or to remain

permanently in opposition’, the Lega’s time in office from 2001 to 2006 suggests that this may not always be the case.

RC, on the other hand, is a radical party in a large coalition of less radical parties, with many of which it has fundamental ideological disagreements on social, economic and foreign policy. If it is to emerge intact from the experience of government to which it has been driven by the force of external circumstances, then it will have to exploit to the full those of its assets which, though possessed in *much* greater quantity by the LN, it has too, at least to some small degree. These include charismatic leadership, where one thinks in particular of the charm, authority and intellectual prowess of a man such as Fausto Bertinotti, and (faction fighting notwithstanding) ideological flexibility – something which is suggested by the party’s very name: ‘Rifondazione Comunista’ can imply both a *return* to communism and its *revision*.

Clearly, in order to go further with our investigation we would need to find a way of measuring ‘success’ in terms of the variable we are interested in: being in government while remaining an outsider. However, we think that, by suggesting the kinds of factors that may impact significantly on success, analysis of the two parties has allowed us to establish a research agenda that could be applied to other cases in other contexts. The three most important factors seem to us to be, first, the characteristics of the governing coalition of which the outsider party is a member where the most important of these characteristics will, in turn, be the number, relative sizes and ideological profiles of the coalition members and – most crucially of all – whether or not the presence of the outsider party is essential for government survival.

Second, the nature of the party’s goals and ideology will be important. This is suggested by the clear contrasts between the LN and RC. In the first place, the LN’s ultimate goal is a very specific, institutional, one – regional autonomy or ‘independence’ – so that to participate in electoral, parliamentary, politics and therefore, potentially, in government, is the obvious thing for it to do. RC’s ultimate goal, on the other hand, is of an incomparably broader and more fundamental kind: nothing less than an (albeit peaceful) social and political revolution involving abolition of the capitalist mode of production. There are many possible roads to this destination of which participation in

parliamentary politics may be one. However, participation in parliamentary politics may also obstruct progress along other roads and vice versa.

In the second place, the LN's ideology is much more 'malleable' than that of RC. Indeed, other than the issue of some form of northern autonomy, one would be very hard pressed to find coherence and consistency in the LN's discourse at *any* stage of its evolution. True to its populist nature, the LN may have stood firm on the principle of defending the 'common people' of the North, however on crucial issues (such as, for instance, free competition, globalisation, the relationship between Church and state and monetary union), the LN's positions have oscillated considerably, depending on circumstances, and whether or not the party remained loyal to its allies or not (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2005). Unlike RC, what guarantees the identity and unity of the LN is – and this is the third factor impinging on success – first, and foremost, its leader (as the difficulty in replacing Umberto Bossi now that his health is failing clearly demonstrates). Although powers are theoretically shared between a president, a council, a secretary and various other organs within the party, it has always been the leader who has kept full control of the movement. Radical (and indeed sudden) changes, such as the one from advocating separatism to accepting 'devolution') have not caused major splits. Those few who speak against the leader are usually cast out as apostates and what had been considered taboo months earlier is soon accepted as the new party line. Bossi has tightened his grip on the party by promoting individuals with little political experience, but strong personal connections to him, to key posts (Miglio, 1994) and by endlessly 'purging' the party of internal opponents. As a result, only those who have been willing to pledge (frequently and publicly) their total allegiance and subservience to 'the founder' have been allowed to remain among the party elite.

RC, as we have seen, has none of this and is, consequently, 'unprotected' against major splits. The coming weeks and months will show whether it is able to use what other assets it has to cope with the basic political dilemma of the position it now finds itself in and thus carry off the precarious balancing act of being both *di lotta e di governo*.



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Table 1. Electoral performance of the Lega Nord, 1990-2004

Year	Type of election	%
1990	(regional)	4.8
1992	(general)	8.7
1994	(general) (proportional part)	8.4
1994	(European)	6
1996	(general – proportional part)	10.1
1999	(European)	4.5
2000	(regional)	5
2001	(general –proportional part)	3.9
2004	(European)	5
2006	(general)	4.6

Note: The 1990 figure refers to the Lega Lombarda, a forerunner of the LN.

Table 2 Voting support and membership of RC, 1992 – 2006

	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006
Chamber elections: n. of votes	2,202,574	2,334,029	3,215,960	1,868,113	2,229,604
N. of members	117,463	113,580	127,073	92,020	92,752*
Members as % of voters	5.3	4.9	4.0	4.9	4.2

Sources: <http://www.ecn.org/reds/prc/VIcongresso/prc0502VIdestini.html>  
[http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rifondazione\\_Comunista](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rifondazione_Comunista)

Note : \* figure is for 2005