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## **Italian Politics and Education Policy**

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# Italian Politics and Education Policy

JAMES L. NEWELL

## Introduction: Italian politics

A short time ago I wrote a book entitled, *The Politics of Italy: Governance in a Normal Country*. In adopting this title, I was trying to make three points:

1. The characteristics of Italy's political system have very often been thought to be unusual, if not anomalous when compared with the political systems of other West European countries; and yet if we look closely, then what we will probably find is that in many if not most important respects, the similarities outweigh the differences.

a) For example, if the normal pattern of party politics in European countries is left-right alternation in office sustained by bi-polar competition, then the last three general elections have shown that Italian party politics conforms to this pattern: the centre-right Casa delle libertà (Cdl) coalition of parties, under Silvio Berlusconi, won the election held in 2001. For the 2006 election to the Chamber of Deputies, the centre-left Unione, under Romano Prodi, came from 3.8 percent behind to stake out a position 0.3 percent ahead of the Cdl in the process taking over the reins of government with a majority of 66 seats.<sup>1</sup> In 2008, it was the turn of the centre right once more to win an overall majority – and this time to do so in

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<sup>1</sup> And incidentally, this was not the extremely narrow victory that so many people thought it was. Taking account of the votes cast in the overseas constituency, the centre left was ahead of the centre right not by 24,755 votes but by 130,322. In the Senate contest the Unione had a majority of two seats and was behind the Cdl by 124,273 votes – showing merely that those 25 and above have a greater tendency to vote for the centre right than those under 25. The Senate result placed the contest here alongside the outcomes of two British general elections and one US presidential election in the post-war period, all of which saw the loser in terms of votes nevertheless emerge as the winner in terms of seats.

the context of a dramatic reduction in the level of party system fragmentation such that the main parties of government and opposition shared over 70 per cent of the vote and 78 per cent of the seats between them – proportions well in line with the corresponding proportions for the other large European democracies.

b) And of course the reduction in party-system fragmentation has – together with the other political changes of recent years – had corresponding effects in terms of strengthening the position of the prime minister, enabling him to act as an authoritative leader rather than as a mediator as tended to be the case with prime ministers of the so-called ‘First Republic’.

c) If a ‘normal’ country is one in which constitutional arrangements provide political integration by offering fixed and enduring points of reference for the large majority of players, then it had to be of significance that in June 2006 voters decisively rejected wide-ranging proposals for change, in the process ruling out the likelihood, for the foreseeable future, of major alterations to the constitution that had been adopted in 1948, and which is therefore now among the oldest in Europe.

2. In part because of the presumed unusual features of its political system, foreign social scientists often compare Italy negatively with other European countries and I feel that on the whole such negative comparisons are undeserved. There are in my opinion at least three possible explanations for this tendency (having to do with ethno-centrism, the nature of the research methods used, and Italians’ own tendency to view their public institutions in very negative terms) and I haven’t got time to go into them now. But they are illustrated by a number of examples.

- a) Thus, the contemporary historian, Paul Ginsborg recently wrote, ‘Italy is one of the most corrupt democracies in Western Europe’ – even though students of corruption routinely lament the difficulties involved in defining the concept and even though it is widely accepted that as a social construction it is not possible to establish criteria that will apply with equal validity in all times and all places. Given these difficulties, it strikes me as at least odd to assert with the confidence that Ginsborg does, that corruption is more widespread in one country than in others.
- b) Again, Italy has often been criticized for the inefficiency of its public services. Yet its health service in 2000 was rated by the World Health Organisation second only to that of France for overall performance.
- c) Rates of violent crime are actually rather low by international standards, notwithstanding Mafia stereotypes. As Paoli and Wolfgang (2001) point out, ‘Statistical yearbooks do not suggest that Italy’s rates of crime and illegality are especially unusual’. While mafia groups have a particularly high profile in Italy, the murder rate, at 1.61 per 100,000, was in 1997 considerably lower than in Spain (2.60) and in countries supposedly rich in social capital such as Finland (2.76). Meanwhile, it was over four times lower than in the United States (7.34). In short, it seems safe to say that Italy has problems that are in many and perhaps most respects no worse than those of other advanced industrial countries, and in some respects much better.
3. To suggest that Italy is not a normal country is to suggest that it cannot be compared successfully with countries elsewhere using standard criteria of

comparison. This is not true in my view. Of course Italy has its unique features as do all countries. But it is not true that apples and oranges cannot be compared. Of course they can: they are both fruits! So one of the points I make in the last chapter of the book – which is devoted to Italian foreign policy – is that despite the somewhat unusual characteristics given to Italian foreign affairs by the Cold War and the fact that the country was home to the largest Communist Party in the West, it has been clear, throughout the post-war period, that Italian policy makers and diplomats have been driven by the desire to maximise their and the country's capacity for autonomous influence on the international stage – which, after all, is what drives the actions of countries and their representatives everywhere.

### **Education policy**

We find very much the same to be true when we turn – as I now do – to look at recent developments in the field of policy towards education, and towards university education in particular. Here too, Italian policy-makers have been driven by the same kinds of concern that have been driving their colleagues in the other countries of Western Europe. These concerns have been of three kinds, in my opinion, and they have been felt with the same degree of intensity regardless of whether the centre right or the centre left has been in office.

First, there has been a concern to gear the education system much more closely to the needs of the country's productive system than has hitherto been the case. In other words, there has been a concern both to improve levels of educational attainment among

the population at large and to ensure that the education system itself is more efficient and effective in producing school-leavers and graduates with the kinds of knowledge and skills that will make the greatest contribution to the country's competitiveness in globalised market places.

Italian policy makers see this as especially important in the light of the specific economic challenges the country faces.

1. Since 1990 Italy has experienced slower growth rates as compared both to earlier decades and to other countries.<sup>2</sup> And these performances have been attributed at least in part to the quality of the labour force, seen as being relatively uneducated as compared with comparable countries.<sup>3</sup>
2. Improvements in education and training are thought to be important to help the country engage in the kind of industrial restructuring that is necessary to help it to cope with the growing competition it has faced in recent years from the newly industrializing countries in the manufacturing sectors (clothing, textiles, footwear, furniture and wood products) in which it itself specializes. These sectors have traditionally been dominated in Italy by unusually high proportions of small firms using employees with relatively low levels of human capital – which makes it difficult for the firms to engage in the kinds of research and development

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas the average rate of growth for the 1970s was 3.9 percent and for the 1980s 2.4 percent, in the 1990s it went down to 1.4 percent and in the six years between 2000 and 2005, it fell even further – to 1.1 percent. Whereas until 1990 growth rates generally speaking equaled and exceeded those of the other large European countries and the United States, since then they have been below the growth rates of these countries.

<sup>3</sup> For example, 'the proportion of working-age males with a secondary education or higher is the fifth lowest in the OECD area after Portugal, Turkey, Spain and Mexico' (Bianco, 2003: 121, my translation).

activities that would enable them to diversify and move away from the sectors in which they have faced the most intense foreign competition.

3. Improvements in education and training are seen as potentially helping to increase employment rates (among the lowest in the EU) – increasing employment rates in turn being seen as important for the contribution they can make to the future financial sustainability of the pensions system in view of Italy's aging population.

In the second place, Italy, along with the other countries making up the eurozone, has been concerned to look to education and training along with other instruments of micro-economic policy as a means of compensating for the constraints on economic policy making that have come with membership of the single currency. That is, adoption of the Euro has meant that exchange rates, deficit spending and other instruments of macro-economic policy have not been nearly as readily available as means of maintaining industrial competitiveness as they were in the past. In particular, Italian governments had been fond of resorting to devaluations of the lira to ensure that the country's goods and services remained competitive in world markets. Now they can no longer do this, so they are under greater pressure than they were before to attempt to achieve the same result by micro-economic measures, that is, measures of public intervention which seek to influence individual parts of the economic system – where that includes the education system.

In the third place, Italian policy-makers together with their counterparts elsewhere in Europe have been concerned to gear the education sector more closely to economic



needs in large part by applying to it the principles of 'new public management'. As a set of principles for the operation of government administrative bodies and the delivery of public services, the 'new public management' has at least four distinctive characteristics.

1. Instead of being held responsible for the correct application of fixed rules to cases, the public official is held responsible for the achievement of substantive results.
2. Therefore, instead of being required to adhere to routines for the performance of work, the official is given discretion in the performance of his or her duties.
3. In order to help the official use such discretion to best effect, rewards, including in some cases job security, are closely tied to achievement of stipulated targets.
4. Functions are no longer performed through a single hierarchy of offices and orders issued from the top downwards, but executive or service-delivery functions are hived off to autonomous agencies or even the private sector, with the bodies concerned obliged to compete with each other for the resources they receive. We can see this very clearly in the latest of recent government education initiatives, to which we now turn.

The most significant of the recent reforms of universities in Italy have in my view been four in number.

1. In 1999 there was a reform of the structure of degree programmes. In essence, the old, four to six-year, degree programme was replaced with a new, two-tier structure offering a three-year *diploma di laurea*, possession of which would then offer access to the second tier, consisting of a two-year *laurea specialistica*. Driving the reform was the belief that that the old *laurea* was no longer 'fit for purpose' (to use that awful, New

Labour, phrase!). Its rationale had been the education to a high standard of excellence of a restricted elite; its requirements therefore such that it was more similar to what in Anglo Saxon countries are known as ‘masters degrees’ than to ‘bachelors degrees’. Consequently, it was marked by very high drop-out rates and a strong correlation with class membership in terms of the social backgrounds of those belonging to the pool from whom graduates were typically drawn. A society in which access to higher education credentials is limited in this way in effect wastes its resources so the intention was to oblige the higher education system to adapt its offering such as to widen access to the credentials. Consequently the reform gave institutions greater autonomy to design their own degree programmes. It also provided that from academic year 2000/01, a new *diploma di laurea* would offer an education enabling access to the labour market for most of the activities for which the old *laurea* had once been required, while a new *laurea specialistica* would offer the advanced training necessary for the successful exercise of certain specific activities, such as medicine and so forth.

2. A second major education reform came in October 2005 when Parliament approved a Government bill providing for significant changes in the mode of recruitment of university faculty. In essence, the position of researcher was to be abolished and the teaching and research currently carried out by researchers done by means of staff employed on fixed-term contracts which could last for a maximum of three years and be renewed only once for a similar duration. In effect, those who, before the reform would have become researchers, would now have to accept a non permanent position and would have six years in which to win a permanent appointment. There were to be changes in the way professors were recruited and to their terms of employment –

notably the requirement to teach for 350 hours per year (in order to allow the university system to offer, without additional cost, the increased number of programmes that came on stream as a result of the ‘three-plus-two’ reform of 1999) and the introduction of differential conditions of employment for professors by establishing a system of incentive payments for them.

Two somewhat smaller-scale changes have come with the election of the Berlusconi government in 2008.

3. In November 2008, the Government introduced a decree law stipulating that those universities spending more than 90 percent of their state funding allocation would not be permitted to take on any new staff. Those spending less than this proportion would be allowed, each year, to take on new staff for a total expenditure not exceeding 50 percent of the salaries of those retiring the previous year (as compared to 20 percent for the public administration as a whole), where 60 percent of the new staff would have to be researchers.

4. Finally, the same decree, which became law in January 2009, stipulated:

- a) that from 2009, seven percent of the universities’ state funding allocations would be distributed taking into account the quality of teaching, the quality of research and the universities’ administrative efficiency;
- b) that the proportion would go up progressively in subsequent years;
- c) that the relevant evaluations would be carried out by the Comitato di indirizzo per la valutazione della ricerca, and the Comitato nazionale per la valutazione del sistema universitario (National Committee for the Evaluation of the University

System, CNVSU). The latter body is linked to the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, is staffed by university professors, and has a range of so-called quality assurance functions similar to the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The former body, which was also set up by the centre left at the end of the 1990s, has similar functions in relation to research.

## **Conclusions**

These legislative initiatives prompt four thoughts:

1. The ways in which they exemplify the principles of the new public management are fairly transparent. Thus the Moratti reform was defended by its supporters on the grounds that eventual elimination of the researcher position as a permanent appointment would raise the pressures on staff at that level to provide proper evidence of productivity and competence. Likewise defenders of the most recent reform argue that the selective distribution of funding it provides for must improve the quality of teaching and research.
2. Second, therefore, there seems little reason to doubt that the reforms have been or will be anything other than successful in their own terms. For example, in relation to the 'three-plus-two' reform, the 2005 annual report of the CNVSU suggests that between 2000 and 2003 the number of degrees awarded rose by some 47 percent (from 159,438 to 234,672). Meanwhile, the same report shows a modest increase in indicators of retention together with a significant increase (from 5 percent to 44 percent) between the old and the new systems in the proportions of

- students managing to complete their degrees within the number of years prescribed for their programmes.<sup>4</sup>
3. However, from a normative point of view I think that application of the principles of new public management to education is as much to be deplored in Italy as it is to be deplored anywhere. I do not think that education funding should be distributed on the basis of external evaluations of quality; nor do I think that academics should be publicly accountable for what they do. Both represent significant attacks on academic freedom whose preservation is fundamental in open and democratic societies. For example, making research funding dependent on external assessments of productivity encourages ‘safe, mainstream research that will lead to a steady stream of publications over more innovative, riskier research where the publication stream is not assured’ (Butler and McAllister, forthcoming). Making academics accountable through the periodic audits conducted by bodies like the QAA and the CNVSU flies in the face of the fact that academics’ commitment to the pursuit of truth necessarily places them in a position analogous to that of judges – who in most jurisdictions are not publicly accountable in the way that legislators are, precisely in order to maximise the likelihood that their decisions deliver justice, uncontaminated by public opinion and popular prejudices.
  4. Finally, the reforms we have considered point to two important conclusions about the nature of the Italian political system.

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<sup>4</sup> Comitato nazionale per la valutazione del sistema universitario, ‘Sesto Rapporto sullo stato del Sistema Universitario’ available at: <http://www.cnvsu.it/library/downloadfile.asp?id=11294>

- a) They sustain an image of a country where policy-making, far from being inefficient, small-scale and incremental, as it was frequently suggested to be during the period of the First Republic, is, rather strategic and guided by clear conceptions of long-term goals to be achieved – exactly as one would expect in the *paese normale* that Italy is.
- b) They point to the significance of anti-political attitudes among the public at large. The Gelmini reform provoked widespread protests in the autumn of last year. These protests rapidly died out once the reform had become law and it is reasonable to suppose that they might not have done had the protestors managed to establish links with significant party-political actors, able to act as effective spearheads for them. The fact that they were unable to do so was clearly related to the very strong anti-political mood in the protest movement that was summed up well by Filippo Andreatta, Professor of International Relations at the University of Bologna. When asked whether he thought the anxieties expressed by the student protestors were closer to being existential or political, he replied:
- I would say a pre-political anxiety. I see in it the lack of any hope rather than a political objective. Unlike in 1968, the protest has not been ignited by any ideology. It is directed against the political class as a whole, which is not seen as representative of the country at large (Portanova, Riva and Schiavulli, 2008: 75).

The significance of this is that a movement that goes beyond a certain point in rejecting politics must, surely, weaken itself by undermining its ability itself to act politically.

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