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Editorial

Italy, the Never-ending Transition and Political Science

James L. Newell and Maurizio Carbone

Welcome to the first issue of the *Bulletin of Italian Politics*, a new political-science journal aimed at academics and policy makers as well as others with a professional or intellectual interest in the politics of Italy. In launching this new publication we have two specific and related aims in mind.

Our first aim is to provide rigorous analysis, in the English language, about the politics of what is one of the European Union's four largest states in terms of population and Gross Domestic Product. We seek to do this aware that too often those in the English-speaking world looking for incisive analysis and insight into the latest trends and developments in Italian politics are likely to be stymied by two contrasting difficulties. On the one hand, they can turn to the daily and weekly print media. Here they will find information on the latest developments, sure enough; but much of it is likely to lack the incisiveness of academic writing and may even be straightforwardly inaccurate. On the other hand, readers can turn either to general political science journals – but here they will have to face the issue of fragmented information – or to specific journals on Italy – in which case they will find that politics is considered only insofar as it is part of the broader field of modern Italian studies. So what we are seeking to do in this new journal is to provide a forum which is designed to promote research in Italian politics and to offer an outlet that counterbalances the fragmentation of the field. In doing this, we also seek to rely on research conducted in Italian, which hardly reaches the English-speaking world (see, for example, Lucarelli and Menotti, 2002 and Plümper and Radaelli, 2004).

Our second aim follows from the first one insofar as, in seeking to achieve it, we hope thereby to provide analysis that readers will find genuinely *useful*. In this way we hope to make our own small contribution to demonstrating the relevance of what political science has to say to those beyond the academic 'ivory towers'; to enabling its practitioners to play 'the kind of part which other social scientists – economists and sociologists – play', and to 'promoting a more authoritative voice in the 'city'' (Blondel,

2001:4-9). The importance of this task, in 2009, can hardly be underestimated. With research funding bodies of all kinds giving increasing emphasis to knowledge transfer and increasingly demanding of applicants that they demonstrate the relevance of what they are doing to non-academic 'end users', political scientists have a self-interested motive for attempting a closer engagement with outside practitioners. And with the world economic crisis and the spiralling levels of public debt that have come with it, this pressure can only increase as governments seek to curtail spending, especially on activities whose more immediate utilitarian value may be somewhat in doubt.

Publication of this first issue roughly coincides with the end of the first year in office of the Berlusconi government elected in 2008 and we have sought to reflect that in the articles that follow. Essentially all of them in one way or another contribute to the task of looking back at 2008, assessing its significance, and taking stock of what, one year on, it has meant for the Italian political system. The piece by De Giorgi and Marangoni does this in a very direct way by providing, for the Italian government, a kind of end-of-year 'report card' documenting, in considerable empirical detail, the main features concerning the government's formation, its composition, its performance, its interaction with the opposition and its levels of popular support. As the authors point out, their piece summarises the results of the investigation, carried out by the University of Siena's Centre for the Study of Political Change (Centro di Ricerca sul Cambiamento Politico, CIRCAP), described in more detail in the latest of its annual reports on the activity of the Italian government. As such, the article's appearance here, in English, is the fruit of precisely the kind of collaborative working with external learned and policy-making bodies we hope as editors to take forward in future issues of the journal.

In the immediate aftermath of 2008, there was a widespread, if quickly dispelled, impression that the result might breathe new life into the efforts at constitutional overhaul that have been pursued and fought over with varying degrees of intensity among national-level politicians ever since the political upheavals of the early 1990s (and in reality since some years before then). After all, the election had considerably reduced the party-system fragmentation that had previously acted as a significant brake on reform by turning large numbers of parties into 'partisan veto players' (Tsebelis, 2002: 2). It had given the two largest parties many more votes than required by the Constitution to enable them, if they could agree among themselves, to introduce change with the certainty that it would not be vulnerable to repeal as had happened in 2006. And it had come at the end of a campaign during which the two main contenders had apparently abandoned a style of competition – reciprocal denials of the claims of the other to legitimacy – that had hitherto helped to render institutional reform intractable. It was therefore not altogether surprising that in May, Prime Minister and leader

of the opposition seemed intent on a regular set of meetings with a view to finding mutually acceptable institutional reforms – even less surprising given the clear incentives both men had: successful reform arguably offered the opportunity of a place in Italian political history as the fathers of a new constitutional settlement, something that seemed likely to be especially attractive to the aging Berlusconi, reputed to want to crown his career at the end of his term as Prime Minister with election to the Presidency. That the agreement never materialised has to be put down to Berlusconi's conflict of interests which shot to the top of the political agenda in the election's immediate aftermath (revealing that there were inherent tensions between dialogue on constitutional reform, and the requirements of effective opposition) and to the profound divisions on the centre left, which act as a brake on bi-partisan dialogue by leaving the main, Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) electorally vulnerable whenever it draws too close to Berlusconi. It is against this background that we publish below a transcript of the roundtable discussion, on whether the failure of constitutional reform is now inevitable, which was sponsored in April this year by the UK Political Studies Association's Italian Politics Specialist Group.

But though formal constitutional change may seem to be off the agenda, at least for the time being, the profound changes which Italian democracy has undergone in other ways in the past decade and a half raises the question of how the long process of change can best be characterised. Leonardo Morlino and Sergio Fabbrini confront this task in their articles drawing on theoretical models to consider the extent to which Italian democracy may have changed its nature, and the part 2008 may have played in this. The two authors essentially agree in their conclusion that while Italian democracy is no longer as consensual as it once was, neither is it a coherent 'competitive' or 'majoritarian' democracy. This is the conclusion to which, from the different perspective of changes in electoral legislation, Carlo Fusaro appears also to be drawn in his article when he points out that the shortcomings of reform must be attributed to politicians' concerns always to seek to square the circle of responding to pressures pushing towards a pattern of majoritarian democracy 'with a sort of 'insurance policy' meant to secure the right of each single party élite to survive as such' (p. 52).

Implicit in the analysis of all three authors, then, is the view, shared with the remainder of the contributors to this issue that it is still too early to assess the degree to which 2008 may represent some kind of watershed for the political system. What *is* clear, however – and it is the essential reason for the uncertainties just mentioned – is the unprecedentedly powerful position in Italian politics that 2008 has given to a single individual: the Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi. He is the centre around which essentially

everything in Italian politics revolves these days. On the one hand, he is the fulcrum around which the centre right is built and whose unity depends almost entirely on his continued popularity. On the other hand, opposition to him is the only common denominator of the parties on the centre left – and thus the source of their weakness and division.

This gives rise to two conundrums. One is where this leaves the left and all those opposed to the hegemony of the culture Berlusconi represents: these are significant issues taken up in the article by Daniele Albertazzi, Clodagh Brook and Charlotte Ross. The other conundrum – obviously – is what will come after Berlusconi: precisely *because* of his centrality, it is quite unclear to what extent the negative qualities he brings to the political system (conflicts of interest, a refusal to tackle corruption and so on) will survive his departure from the scene. Only when that happens will we know for sure what have been the consequences of the political changes that were unleashed by the '*Mani pulite*' investigations of the early 1990s.

Until the time when we can draw conclusions about such larger questions, it behoves us patiently to concentrate on the analysis of less far-reaching, but no less important areas of research such as those associated with the specifics of public policy. It is in this spirit that we offer Lucia Quaglia's article on national attitudes towards the Lisbon Treaty and Natalino Ronzitti's piece on the Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya. Quaglia shows that, amongst political parties and policy makers, mainstream views on the future of the European Union have remained in favour of closer integration. But as in other member states, the issue of Europe is becoming increasingly 'politicised'. Ronzitti argues that the new Treaty between Italy and Libya marks the end of a process of normalisation between the two countries and can boost Libya's integration into the circuit of international politics.

The link between politics and policies, as well as the role that Italy plays or wants to play in the international arena, are now the object of contentious analyses, or at least much more so than they were in the 1990s. It is with this in mind, and in the interests of maintaining and enhancing the journal's relevance to practitioners, that we wish regular briefings and updates on the various areas of public policy to become established features of future issues. Thus will we demonstrate the wider value of academic analysis of the politics of Italy. We look, among our colleagues, to the many talented Italian specialists to help us in this endeavour.

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