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THE MISSING RENEWAL OF
THE RULING CLASS

Luca Verzichelli

Introduction
As reported by all the international observers, the Italian general elections of February 2013 have brought about a situation of extreme political uncertainty. However, one can unquestionably argue that the political composition of the parliament in the XVIIth republican legislature exactly mirrors the different attitudes of the Italian public towards politics and political elites: the pyrrhic victory of the Democratic Party (PD) – actually a poor performance in comparison with the 2008 results – and, more generally, the centre-left coalition represent those Italians who desired a turning point from the era of Berlusconi, but still believed in a ‘party-democracy’ based on mass-party organizations ruled by established elites: the leaders of the PD and of its smaller allies had hoped that the effect of an important innovation such as the direct consultation of the voters in a primary election for the choice of the chief of the coalition could be a sufficient instrument to overcome the decline of trust in the traditional political actors. However, this message did not reach more than 30 per cent of valid votes (roughly one-fourth of potential voters) supporting the centre-left.

On the other hand, the share of centre-right voters – more or less the same size – who confirmed their support for the coalition led by the inexhaustible TV tycoon, represents the part of Italy that simply does not believe in the previous message. They do not believe in the centre-left parties and they still prefer their antagonistic hero: a populist leader who was able to keep the ‘leftists’ out of government for years, and to be the most long-lasting occupant of the Palazzo Chigi – the base of the Italian Chief Executive – in the Republic’s history: indeed, in his eighteen years of political engagement (with about 100 months spent as Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri), Berlusconi put a very varied body of politicians together, from some truly complete beginners, selected from the managers of his own firms, to some members of traditional governing parties, as well as some former neo-Fascists and former representatives of the radical left. Berlusconi has always been personally involved in the selection of the most important candidates of a very weak de-institutionalized party organization: Forza Italia and, since 2008, the larger PDL – the Popolo della Libertà.

A lot has still to be written about the incredible recovery of Silvio Berlusconi in the 2013 campaign, but at the beginning of 2015 he is still the leader of a major party, and only history will show whether this was just the swansong of a leader with no more chances to have any
impact on Italian politics. However, it is a fact that the success of the centre-right is, to a large extent, due to Berlusconi’s personal appeal: all his competitors within the centre-right coalition disappeared after trying to challenge him, and even the recent attempts of some centre-right second-rank leaders to distance themselves from his very disputable political performance were basically unsuccessful. For instance, notwithstanding its opposition to the technocratic government in charge after November 2011, the Northern League has been dramatically reduced in its electoral performance, while the other lists allied to the PDL in 2013 had very poor results.¹

A third (and relatively new) force now represented in Parliament thanks to the astonishing result of the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, or M5S) corresponds to those Italians who reject the antagonistic logic between the two previous visions. They are simply fed up with all the narratives of the past, and they ascribe the entire responsibility for the Italian crisis to the whole political establishment, refusing any kind of distinction within it and promoting – a unique case of a widely supported purely populist movement in Europe – a ‘democracy of citizens’ which should replace the parliamentary chain of delegation with some kind of direct representation managed through the Internet. To some extent, the rejection of the bipolar logic centred on the distinction between old party elites is shared by a share of about 10 per cent of centrist voters supporting the list Scelta Civica led by Mario Monti. When the technocratic prime minister decided to take the leadership of a coalition including the small parties at the political centre, he tried several times to approach those voters tempted by M5S, putting forward a simple argument: ‘I share your protest against the ineffective, incompetent and unfair party elites who have devastated the Italian social structure and the economy’.

Mutual mistrust among the supporters of these three visions is evident in the development of Italian politics, and this is actually the main reason for the impasse following the 2013 election. More than different policy preferences, what divides the political actors lies in their different estimations of the relationship between the public and the elites in Italy today. In the present chapter I will focus on the explanations for this impasse, which makes the process of elite settlement² weak, if not impossible. Starting from very simple data on the difficult process of elite renewal, I will argue that the responsibilities for this difficult situation have to be shared between national and mid-level party leaders, who alternated themselves on the political ladder during the last twenty years. These politicians (but the same should be probably said of the Italian social and economic elites) did not realize the persistent and increasing distance between the elite and the ordinary people. Then, I will put forward the argument that there is a serious disease affecting political parties, which is surely not an Italian peculiarity but it has, in this country, particularly heavy implications.³ In this general context of lack of foresight shown by party elites in Italy, I will highlight two dimensions: the high degree of intergenerational conflict and the persistence of a familistic view of politics. Finally, I will summarize the state of the Italian political elite, trying to understand possible scenarios for the near future.

The difficult emergence of a new ruling class: some pieces of evidence

An uninterrupted discussion about the necessity to renew the ruling class has accompanied the changes within the Italian political system after 1994. The March general elections, that year, marked the evaporation of the old parties and the striking victory of Berlusconi’s personal party, which brought about an astonishing rate of turnover in the parliamentary elite.

However, since then, all the attempts to establish a new core of politicians on the two sides of the new bipolar party system have failed. The permanence of two leaders like Berlusconi and Prodi was not the effect of the consolidation of a whole dominant party elite, but quite
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the opposite: a lack of alternatives was basically the reason for their duration, and those who challenged them have been defeated one after the other, sometimes provoking splits and dramatic changes within the coalitions. As a result, a very unpredictable scenario has characterized the Italian democracy since 1994: the illusion of a simplified party system with more durable and authoritative cabinets lasted for a while, especially when Berlusconi was in power (2001–6 and 2008–11), with quite large majorities, a certain capability of control over his own coalition and an evident effect of cohesion within the opposite camp. However, during these two decades the Italian political system experienced a lot of unprecedented phenomena connected to the crisis of the parties: continual splits, repeated cases of individual defectors among MPs, a rather high degree of ‘legislative rebellion’ by political representatives, manifest conflicts among members of the executive bodies, other opportunistic behaviour by individual politicians such as inappropriate dual mandates and other unfair practices sometimes contrary to the statutes of their own parties.

The literature on the delays and missed promises of the Italian politicians after 1994 is huge, and reflects the problems of credibility of the whole ruling class. Here we can simply recall that sociological research has extensively illustrated the inadequacy of the Italian ruling class and an increasingly deteriorating link to public opinion (see Carboni, 2010). On this line of reasoning, political scientists have often underlined the uncertainties in the processes of elite settlement and elite institutionalization, which are the crucial processes at the core of a stable democratic accountability. These persistent rates of uncertainty and instability are evident when we consider long term survey data about the degree of democratic satisfaction (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996) but the evidence of positional studies of the elites is also useful for seeing the magnitude of the problem.

The amount of turnover and the rate of seniority are usually considered good indicators for describing the solidity of a given parliamentary elite. Here we can briefly show the data for these indicators in a long term perspective (for reasons of simplicity we are using only the data for the lower chamber) as in Figure 9.1.

The data clearly illustrate the difficulties in the consolidation of a new parliamentary elite in Italy: after the exceptional elections of 1994, the rate of emergence of new politicians remained high. This is to be connected to the alternation of victories of the two opposing coalitions, but also to the continual rearrangement within the political parties and within the same coalitions. Interestingly enough, the rate of senior deputies (here defined as MPs with at least two legislatures’ experience) never reached the very stable threshold of 40 per cent which had characterized the age of the First Republic. This is a clear sign of deinstitutionalization of the party elites. Especially after 2005, when the introduction of a blocked list system allowed a centralized procedure of parliamentary selection, party selectors were not able to ensure the consolidation of parliamentary elites. The experience of the XVIth legislature, which started in 2008, is particularly significant: both the new PDL (which, as expected, had won the elections with a clear majority) and the PD (created the year before from the merger of two parties, heirs of the traditional Christian Democrats and Communist Party) reinforced their positions thanks to a strong concentration of seats and to their new organizations. The PD in particular had experienced a highly participative process of foundation, with the elections of a general party assembly and with the primary elections of its first leader, Walter Veltroni. The success of both parties and the consequent simplification of the parliamentary scenario towards a quasi-two-party system were seen by all observers as the starting point for a new phase of consolidation of the Italian political elite, but these premises were soon contradicted in both parties: in the case of PDL, the personalized leadership of Berlusconi was contested by a number of internal challengers, while the PD was endangered by internal fragmentation, which led to a new leadership change (from Veltroni to
Bersani, with the interlude of Dario Franceschini as interim secretary) and to splits with some moderate figures (including one of the founder leaders, Francesco Rutelli) who left the party during the legislature.

The problems of consolidation of a new ruling class are even better illustrated by the data on the profiles of top national leaders, i.e. the selected group of people who hold responsibilities within the national executive. Using a short summary of data extracted by larger surveys (Verzichelli, 2009; Verzichelli and Cotta, forthcoming), we can show in Table 9.1 the profile of the people included in the ministerial inner circle in comparison with some analogous data for the First Republic.

Table 9.1 provides additional information about the profile of ministers from the Second Republic: they are no younger (actually they are a bit older!) than the average age of their

Figure 9.1 New MPs and senior MPs in the Lower Chamber, 1948–2013

Note: New MPs are those MPs elected for the first time to one of the two parliamentary chambers. The figures for senior MPs are defined as the percentage of MPs who had experience of at least two legislatures (no matter in which of the two chambers) before being elected.

Source: CIRCaP Parliamentary Elite Archive
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predecessors. This has to do with the relatively old age of ministerial aspirants. Throughout the Second Republic, the mean age of MPs new to parliament rose from legislature to legislature (Figure 9.2). This means that the renewal of the new political forces was done selecting rather old personnel to replace the defeated politicians. This trend of progressive ageing of the political class continued without interruption until the 2008 elections, characterized by the predominance

Table 9.1 Profile of Italian ministers. First and Second Republic compared

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mean duration of government</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean duration of ministerial career (years)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of ministerial offices</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of appointments/different jobs</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean age of entry into government</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ministers with previous parliamentary experience</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ministers with previous junior ministerial experience</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ministers with just one ministerial experience</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Ministers directly recruited to ‘core executive’</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of individuals appointed as ministers</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: The core executive includes the offices of Prime Minister and Vice Prime Minister, and the office of Minister of Economy and Finance (as well as the corresponding offices existing until the nineties: Budget, Treasury, Finance), Justice, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Defence.

Source: CIRCaP Parliamentary Elite Archive

Figure 9.2 Mean age of Italian MPs (Lower Chamber and Senate, all MPs and new MPs), 1948–2013

Source: CIRCaP Parliamentary Elite Archive
of two ‘majoritarian’ parties (see above) and, above all, in 2013, by the significant rejuvenation of the ranks of the PD and the impressively young mean age of the M5S representatives.

With regard to the important features of the profile of the ministerial elite, another innovation from the Second Republic is the presence of different ‘surrogates’ of career politicians, such as techno-political policy experts, part-time professional politicians or figures with a less defined political profile. The data confirm that, in recent times, ministers tended to be more connected to specific ‘policy roles’. On the other hand, ministers from the Second Republic show a higher probability of having been recruited directly within the inner circle, without a period of training in the second ranks of government. The traditional feature of a relatively long parliamentary experience as a precondition for entering the ministerial elite has decreased by about twenty points, and the requirement of having experience as a junior minister has almost completely disappeared. Overall, a sort of hybridization between different types of careers has emerged: some ministers are recruited for their evident expertise, being suitable only for specific policy-related offices; other ministers are generalist politicians who take not more than a couple of important offices; and others still are purely technocrats (sometimes recruited also by ‘political’ cabinets) dealing with delicate issues such as the economy, environment, infrastructure or health.

However, ministers with more clearly technocratic profiles seem, in general, to have shorter expectations for their ministerial life and they are much more exposed to reshuffles decided by the prime minister. Interesting cases of sacking can be identified in the deselection of technical ministers of the Second Republic: the ministers Ruggero, Tremonti and Siniscalco lost their posts under the Berlusconi governments after policy disagreements with the chief executive. Personalization and concentration of power because of the increasing legitimacy of the government leader have thus been important phenomena in recent years, impacting on the relationship between leadership and ministerial elite.

I do not need to summarize here detailed evidence about the difficult reconstruction of a credible political class in Italy after 1994. What seems more useful for the purposes of this chapter is providing a comprehensive analysis of some peculiar aspects such as the ‘lost opportunities’ and the ‘lack of continuity’ within the elite formation and circulation. This will lead me to a more robust interpretation of the unproductive renewal of the Italian political elite. My proposal is therefore to move to a qualitative picture, first, capturing the important moments of stalemate in the selection of the political class and, second, analysing the most critical aspects of the relationships between political leaders and their immediate followers.

Lost opportunities: critical elections and the missed consolidation of the political class

The image of a lost opportunity for the formation of a new and prominent ruling class in Italy has been repeatedly used in different contexts. Michele Salvati (2000) has connected the lost opportunities for a renewal of the Italian elites with the delay in modernizing the economic system. From a different perspective, Lorenzo Ornaghi and Vittorio Parsi have argued (2001) that the elites who survived the crisis of the mid-nineties lost the opportunity to recreate a strong link with the very fragmented sectors of Italian society. According to these authors, Italian leaders have shown a lack of vision, abdicating their duty to drive change and trying to survive by employing purely technical adaptations. As a consequence, the political change would have proved incomprehensible and disappointing to a large part of the Italian public. More recently, a book edited by eminent economists has shown the lost opportunities for a radical renewal of the labour market of politicians (Boeri et al., 2010), and even the recent empirical studies of political careers in Italy illustrate a number of promises that have been not kept (Verzichelli, 2010).
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The list of references could be much longer: many observers have in fact stressed the problem of lost opportunities for a fruitful elite change. In order to add more qualitative evidence on the missed renewal of the political class, at least four important points in time can be identified. A first critical period was that following the 1994 elections: Italians immediately understood that the transition would be neither easy nor decisive. This not just because of the sudden failure of the first Berlusconi government and the birth of the first full technocratic experience (the Dini government), but because of the diffuse awareness that the new leadership was not going to bring a real renewal of the political elite. With the passing of time, the liberal revolution claimed by Berlusconi in the spring of 1994 became a vague memory and Forza Italia, which would have lost many of its founder members, transformed itself in a sort of personalized party, with no solid internal organizations and no chance to grow new and autonomous leaders. Until the foundation of a larger but still personalized party such as the PDL, in 2008, Forza Italia kept being an incomplete construction: grounded on a mix of territorial second-rank politicians from the parties of the First Republic and a group of managers directly co-opted from Berlusconi’s environment, the party was always ready to support the leader, showing a remarkable reactivity during the electoral campaigns, but it also proved to be extremely weak and divided in day-to-day politics.

On the centre-left, the difficult life of the Olive tree (L’Ulivo) coalition and the breakdown of the Prodi government (1998) marked a second lost opportunity: the attempt to overcome the immobility of the pre-existing elites, moving to a federation of progressive forces, failed because of the resistance of the party apparatus to such a radical change of direction. According to Alfio Mastropaolo (1997), the Cashmere Revolution represented by the new entrants of 1994 was followed by a Cashmere Restoration, dominated by the party establishments.

A third phase of disillusion occurred after the defeat of the centre-right coalition at the regional elections of 2005. The doubts raised by some of the allies of Mr Berlusconi were solved with a minor reshuffle of the ministerial team and with the enlargement of the larger coalition, now opened to some small personalized parties. The new political equilibrium sought by the leader of the Catholic centre (Marco Follini, who would soon leave the centre-right coalition) was not achieved and Berlusconi went back to his populist approach, changing the electoral system a few months before the end of the legislature and standing again as a candidate for the premiership in the next legislative elections (2006).

Finally, one should remember the above-mentioned lost opportunity of the XVIth legislature, the most impressive in terms of measurable negative consequences such as mistrust of politicians and rejection of the classic idea of ‘political party’. If the failure of the PDL can be directly linked to the personal conduct of Berlusconi (both his very questionable private life while he was serving as prime minister, and his style as party leader), the problems within the PD were connected to the strong conflicts between its internal factions and, particularly, between ‘old’ and ‘new’ leaders. To some extent, this is still the problem to be faced by the PD and the centre-left camp, which has not yet succeeded in ‘turning the page’.

Missing changes in party leadership: the fate of ‘second fiddles’

No doubt, the amount of political change produced after 1992 has not created stable stratifications and clear hierarchies within the political elites. On the contrary, the political confrontation has taken the shape of a bellum omnium contra omnes: the notion of party discipline has almost disappeared in a country where, for about half a century, a factionalized party like the DC had always found the necessary equilibrium to remain in power and the largest communist party in the Western hemisphere used to be the main opposition.
The extreme consequence of party indiscipline – the disappearance of party establishments – is actually a recurrent situation in the Italian Second Republic. If one counts the number of defections from parliamentary groups (an almost unprecedented phenomenon in the First Republic), it can easily be seen that the four previously mentioned points of stalemate were followed by dramatic increases in parliamentary fluidity (Figure 9.3). This is actually a complex phenomenon which includes the effects of real splits and/or phases of merging between forces, but even a number of individual moves, because of opportunistic decisions by single MPs (those defecting to other parties). However, the combined effects of all these factors are the weak consolidation of parliamentary parties and the disarray among the elite ranks.

Moreover, the patterns of internal party competition developed during these two decades denote some paradoxical situations that can be described as a lack of rapport between leaders and followers. The common denominator in all the important cases is the disappearance of the traditional system of selection delegated to party congresses: not a single party was able to organize regular conferences during the past two decades, and in any case the leadership selection was generally made before the pre-congress debate or proposed to the general acclaim of the whole party conference.

In terms of leader effectiveness, a different fate has characterized the two sides of the system: on the right, leaders such as Berlusconi (Forza Italia, PDL), Bossi (Northern League), Casini (Democratic Centre) or even Fini (leader of the right wing National Alliance, who subsequently joined PDL and then founded the FLI) remained the undisputable heads of their organizations for about twenty years, although with very different degrees of charisma and autonomy. Berlusconi has surely shown some of the characteristics of other Western populist leaders as a prime minister (Campus, 2006), but his relationship with the top party leaders has always been
rather peculiar, given the personal nature of his leadership (McDonnell, 2013). As a consequence, interactions within the party elite have been characterized by an absence of any open confrontation and by bilateral relationships between the leader and individual followers. Even the events following the electoral decline of the party, which readopted its old title of Forza Italia at the end of 2013, confirm the peculiarities of such a personal party: the faction opposing the decision of Berlusconi to leave the grand coalition government was forced to split (founding the New Centre-Right party) while the weak internal opposition led by the former minister Raffaele Fitto was soon neutralized by Berlusconi. Bossi has been a strong charismatic leader, able to build a relatively structured party (probably the most effective party machine in the Second Republic) but, at the same time, to personalize the central structure of the party. The destiny of the ‘colonels’ in all these parties (as well as within the other centre-right parties) has been really sad: working hard in a context of competition for power with no chance of a promotion.

A dissimilar situation, with a not very different outcome, has characterized the left of the political system, which has always suffered a systematic lack of leadership, to be filled by external figures (first of all the coalition leader Romano Prodi, and to some extent other figures such as Giuliano Amato and Carlo Azelio Ciampi). The competition for the leadership of the main parties of this camp has always been uncertain and unclear. This has led to some forms of shared leadership (both in the PDS and in the post-Christian Democratic forces leading the centre-left coalition) and, above all, to a very litigious establishment, which has been inherited by the PD. The introduction of the primary election, strongly demanded by Veltroni at the beginning of the adventure of this innovative form of party, did not pacify this fragmented elite, which is still experiencing a very difficult phase of harsh confrontation (see below).

Still waiting for the ‘good Italy’: perspectives for a new ruling class

So far, two phenomena have been discussed: the inability of Italian leaders to take the various chances they had to change the political system, and the lack of communication between political leaders and their immediate followers, which has undermined continuity within each party organization. These are two sides of the same coin, that, in short, can be defined as a persistent empty space characterizing at least twenty years: throughout this time, the Italian ruling class has in fact been characterized by an incessant lack of political responsibility and by the ‘abdication’ of its duty to keep cultivating the reputation of all the political institutions. A full comprehension of the nature of this phenomenon is surely beyond the goals of this short analysis, but we can try at least to better focus the factors which have probably contributed to such a situation.

A first element to be stressed is the intergenerational gap. Italian politicians have been, and to a large extent they remain, an expression of the ‘older’ generation, and the renewal at the top elite level has not been made possible. With the passing of time, this distance increased, and all the strategies provided by the parties of the Second Republic do not seem to be working in reducing the gap. Indeed, the striking success of M5S in the Lower Chamber elections in 2013 proves that, for the very first time, the youngest cohorts of voters had a remarkably different reaction. Other signs of this generational problem are evident in the PDL, with the shy attempts to create some degree of autonomy from Berlusconi and, above all, in the duel between two PD candidates at the centre-left primary elections of 2012: a large part of the party establishment supported the secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, against the mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who is the main figure in a generational movement within the left party, openly demanding the scrapping of the old elite.
The second element concerns the egocentricity and the high self-esteem of Italian politicians. A lot of facts should be adduced here to show the widespread arrogance of Italian career politicians, especially in respect of the repeated episodes of bribery and corruption. The most transparent evidence, however, lies in the continued attempts made in the past two decades to maximize the direct and indirect benefits guaranteed by different pieces of legislation, for instance allowances to representatives, electoral reimbursements and fiscal facilitation for parties and political think tanks. All these benefits were basically increased until the shocking crisis that led to a technical government in the autumn of 2011. In any event, parties represented in parliament have so far prevented the adoption of a law implementing the constitutional provisions concerning the transparency of political parties and a structural limit on the use of public resources devoted to the political organizations.

Not least, the persistence of familistic and clientelistic attitudes within the political class is another aspect to be stressed in explaining the stalemate of the Italian political class. Although it is impossible to calculate the extent of familism in Italian politics, all sociological surveys and, in particular, journalistic reports speak about an increase in the ‘private’ transmission of political benefits. The lesson of tangentopoli has been not learned, as is shown by the large-scale use of political patronage and an illogical (and sometimes illegal) use of public resources by elected politicians. If it was the centre-right coalition at the heart of the repeated scandals before 2013 (with a high perception of political corruption especially in the two symbolic regions of Lombardy and Lazio, where the centre-right governments were forced to resign), the scandal of the political management of a bank considered very close to the centre-left camp, the Monte dei Paschi di Siena, had very similar effects of producing mistrust, showing long-term connivances and the precise responsibilities of the political leaders.

Is this elite decay irreversible? The film Girlfriend in a Coma – a critical analysis by the Economist editor Bill Emmott on the decline of the Italian political system over the past twenty years – proposes a sort of double conclusion: the sign ‘the end’ evolves into ‘this is not the end’, while a number of excerpts from the interviews collected for the film, including that with the prime minister Mario Monti, describe the problems of mala Italia and some relatively optimistic perspectives for a good Italy in the years to come.

From the perspective of an elite-centred analysis, one cannot be particularly optimistic. The Italian ruling class has demonstrated an inability to change, and to a large extent it did not want to change, its mind. Political elites, in particular, proved to be egocentric, ungenerous and not forward-looking at all. This applies particularly to the top leaders who have not ensured continuity in their ideas and in their parties, but their defects have been mirrored by the incompetence and the disreputable behaviour of many local politicians and administrators.

The results of the 2013 elections highlight the consequences of these mistakes. The conflicting ‘faces’ of Italian public opinion, perfectly mirrored in the XVIIth legislature, are, respectively, instinctive trust in the leader (and only in him) still shown by Berlusconi’s followers; the open but self-destructive self-analysis of a party elite which cannot recognize the real world (especially embodied by the PD elite, but somehow scattered in other sectors of the political elite); and finally the total rejection of the existing order, which is well represented by the instances of M5S.

This is clearly the most difficult point of departure for anybody who wants to rebuild a viable political perspective in this amazing political system. The main difficulty lies, in the short run, in the very narrow path leading to a new political equilibrium: how to keep the present elites sufficiently unified to give the country a new government, to start a few ‘emergency’ policy plans to give a chance to the Italian economy to start again, and to implement the basic institutional (and perhaps constitutional) reforms which can allow the political system to regain some of the large amounts of time wasted.
What seems to be particularly hard to reach is a sufficient degree of elite settlement, a necessary condition in the attempt to reconstruct a positive relationship between elites and public. In comparison with twenty years ago this goal seems even more ambitious, since the factors at work then, the bipolar simplification of the political space and the high rate of trust in EU institutions seem to be much less incisive now. A new set of endogenous and, if possible, exogenous factors are therefore needed to bring the Italian political elite back to an acceptable level of legitimacy.

Notes

1 Of an overall result of 29.1 per cent of the popular vote (Chamber of Deputies) for the centre-right coalition, PDL achieved 21.6 per cent, while the Northern League had 4.1 per cent of the votes (nationwide) and the total of the other centre-right lists was not more than 3.5 per cent. This is an interesting piece of evidence in terms of the personal success of Berlusconi, with crucial implications for the selection of the political elite: Berlusconi has now a much greater control over the MPs of PDL, and most of his former and current competitors have been excluded from parliament.

2 The notion of elite settlement as a necessary condition for the consolidation of the democratic order is suggested by the extensive research of John Higley on the relationships between elites and regime stability. See, in particular, Higley and Burton (2006).

3 Recent reflections by some well-known Italian opinion makers insist on the ineffectiveness of political parties. Two books in particular, by Piero Ignazi (2012) and Marco Revelli (2013), stress, with quite different tones and implications, the peculiarities of the crisis of the Italian parties.

4 The overall figures for the index of bipartitism were in 2008 higher than 70 per cent (votes) and higher than 75 per cent (parliamentary seats). These figures mark the highest peak of bipartitism in the whole republican experience.

5 Among the traditional allies of Berlusconi, the leader of the democratic centre Casini had refused to enter the new party since 2008, leaving the coalition before the elections, while Fini joined the new party and obtained the office of Speaker of the Lower Chamber. From this position, Fini criticized Berlusconi several times, until his decision to quit supporting the government (December 2010) and the consequent split of his little party (Futuro e Libertà). Among the other important leaders who left Berlusconi’s party most recently one should mention the former ministers Frattini (close to the position of Mr Monti), Tremonti (elected in 2013 with the Northern League), La Russa and Meloni (elected in a satellite list allied to the PDL in 2013).

6 Besides governmental leaders recruited from other elite pyramids (Ciampi, Dini, Monti) or immediately called to the top of the government after their emergence on the political ladder (Berlusconi, Prodi), other important ministers such as Tremonti, D’Alema, Padoa Schioppa, Mancino, Napolitano and Fini have been directly appointed to a top government office during the Second Republic.

7 Their criticism is, correctly, addressed to the whole ruling class, which means not just the top political class but the whole group of policymakers who were in charge of the most important policy processes in the years of the transition.

8 Needless to say, the use of his personal resources to finance party initiatives and even the (supposed) exchanges to ‘buy’ the consensus of some MPs elected in other parties. In particular, Berlusconi has been accused of fraud for having obtained the support of a few deputies from the opposition parties on 14 December 2010, when his government survived a confidence vote in the Lower Chamber by just three votes.

9 With the passing of time, the leading group of the League was indeed overlapping the restricted circle of Bossi’s friends and relatives. After the scandals of 2012 and the involvement of several of the League’s top leaders in various episodes of illegal party financing and corruption, the divide between Bossi’s circle and the reformists (led by the new secretary Roberto Maroni) emerged, endangering the present and the future assets of the party.

10 A paradigmatic example was the decision of the Democratic Left Party national council, in 1994, to appoint Massimo D’Alema as the successor of Achille Occhetto (the last leader of the Communist party, who had founded the new PDS in 1991) despite the fact that a large consultation of the membership had indicated the name of Walter Veltroni.
In the contest for the Senate, where the minimum age for the active electorate is 25 years, M5S achieved 23.79 per cent, that is to say almost 2 points less than the result of the same list in the Lower Chamber.

Investigative reports by some famous journalists on maladministration and clientelism have had an amazing success over the past two decades, particularly the book by two journalists from Corriere della Sera (Rizzo and Stella, 2007), who reintroduced the term *casta* (‘caste’) to describe the attitudes of many Italian politicians to practising political clientelism and patronage.

References


