

Introduction: Enough Vaccine? The Berlusconi Years

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Berlusconi is one of those illnesses that you treat with a vaccine. To cure ourselves of Berlusconi, we need a good dose of Berlusconi vaccine. We need to see him in power. (Indro Montanelli¹)

This special issue originates from a series of panels organized by Felia Allum and James Newell of the Italian Politics Specialist Group at the 2003 Political Studies Association (PSA) Conference. Over three days in Leicester, an excellent line-up of speakers discussed different aspects of Italian political life under the Berlusconi government as it approached the end of its second year in office. Three of the speakers from Leicester (Osvaldo Croci, Gianfranco Pasquino and Franca Roncarolo) have contributed articles to this issue on the topics of Italian foreign policy, the centre-left in opposition and Berlusconi's leadership style. Three authors who were not in Leicester (Michele Capriati, Ilvo Diamanti and Elisa Lello) were later invited on board by the guest editors as we sought to broaden the scope of the issue to cover the essential themes of the economy and the internal dynamics of the centre-right coalition.

As demonstrated by the wide range of papers at the PSA conferences in Leicester (2003), Lincoln (2004), Leeds (2005) and the Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI) Conference in London (2004), Silvio Berlusconi and his government have attracted a lot of attention from scholars outside Italy. The main reason for this is, of course, the Forza Italia leader's populist brand of politics and his position as Italy's richest man, sole media mogul and Prime Minister.² Giovanni Sartori wrote in early 2002 that what he termed 'the Berlusconi problem' called into question Italy's international legitimacy and, as he commented, the watching world media 'increasingly see the Berlusconi anomaly as a highly suspicious one that violates the fundamental rules of democracy'.³ The persistent criticism of Berlusconi and his government since 2001 by foreign television and print media thus reflects the degree of bemusement and anxiety that Italy's Prime Minister has created outside Italy and cannot simply be attributed to 'anti-Italian prejudice' or

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'a communist plot' as many within the Casa delle Libertà (House of Liberties—CDL) and Italy's media would have us believe.⁴

Despite the significant questions raised about him both at home and abroad, on 5 April 2004 Berlusconi became the longest-serving Prime Minister in the history of the Italian Republic, a record previously held by his old friend and patron Bettino Craxi. During Berlusconi's nearly four years in power, much has happened. 11 September not only dramatically changed international relations, but had significant effects on the domestic politics of all the major European powers. Italy also endured a painful transition to the Euro, a problem exacerbated by the lack of preparation beforehand and the absence of effective supervision afterwards. Indeed, the Euro has become one of the prime scapegoats for Italy's economic woes due, in part, to its identification with Romano Prodi, the former President of the European Commission (1999–2004), who secured Italian entry into European Monetary Union (EMU) when Prime Minister and is also the likely future centre-left candidate for the Premiership in the 2006 elections. Within the government, the key ministries of Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Finance have all changed hands at least once, and Berlusconi has spent much of his time mediating between the junior partners of his very openly and bitterly divided coalition.⁵ The leader of the Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi, became seriously ill in March 2004 and has not yet returned to full-time politics. In his absence, Gianfranco Fini of Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance—AN) and Marco Follini (Union of Christian Democrats—UDC) were able to use their parties' good results in the 2004 European elections (achieved largely at the expense of Forza Italia) to remove the Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti, thus seemingly delivering a major blow to the 'Northern axis' within the cabinet.⁶ Finally, Berlusconi's judicial problems appear to be over for the moment, although this is due more to technicalities, application of the statute of limitations and legislative changes pushed through parliament (in which, of course, Berlusconi and several of his lawyers serve) rather than clear-cut acquittals.⁷

This special issue of *Modern Italy* looks at Italian political life under the Berlusconi government since 2001 from several different perspectives. That is not to say, however, that certain common themes do not run through the articles presented here. In particular, we frequently encounter the closely related questions of style versus substance and rhetoric versus results. Franca Roncarolo's article, for example, is devoted to an analysis of what she terms 'Berlusconi's rhetorical leadership'. According to Roncarolo, Berlusconi studiously adopts a 'presidential' style, mirroring that of the US President. In line with his 'permanent campaign' strategy, Berlusconi 'prefers to announce his projects as a whole, anticipating the possible results, rather than building support on a day-by-day basis for each part of a complex programme'. Echoing Gianfranco Pasquino's article, Roncarolo concludes that 'Berlusconi can be defined as an almost paradigmatic example of the rhetorical leader who is generally quite skilful at campaigning, but is not as effective at building public support for his political programmes'. However, 'serial-announcing' produces its intended effect of generating optimism only when both announcer and announcements are seen as trustworthy and credible.⁸ In the Italian case, the government has lost much of its credibility and over three years of grand announcements, overambitious plans and reassurances about the imminence

of economic recovery have strengthened feelings of pessimism and disillusion, rather than preventing them.⁹

Osvaldo Croci also deals with the question of style versus substance, arguing that if the CDL has brought changes to Italian foreign policy, they concern its tone and style far more than its substance. While both Berlusconi and his critics, albeit for very different reasons, claim that he has set a new course for Italian foreign policy, this is not borne out by the facts and Croci contends that what new activism there is in this area can trace its roots back well beyond 2001 to the early 1990s. On the thorny issue of the Iraq war, for example, Berlusconi had to reconcile his personal instinct (to weigh in immediately behind the United States) with the traditional guiding principles of Italian foreign policy as, before him, Massimo D'Alema had had to do during the Kosovo campaign. Another high-profile event in recent years was the Italian Presidency of the European Union. However, as Croci observes, despite its good intentions, it achieved little and 'is probably destined to be remembered only for Berlusconi's gaffes'.¹⁰ Of course, whether the Italian public is fully aware of how its government and Prime Minister are perceived abroad is debatable given Berlusconi's ability to 'construct his image and invent stories in front of a public which is largely deprived of alternative sources of information'.¹¹

As Roncarolo notes, Berlusconi began to step back from some of his pre-election promises as early as July 2001, shifting the most important deadlines to a more distant future. Coupled with this strategy was the apportioning of blame to the centre-left for supposedly having left the CDL with a much greater public debt than had previously been believed. Almost from the beginning of the Berlusconi government's time in office, 'there was an evident attempt by ministers to prepare the ground for a "strategic retreat" from electoral promises on taxes, pensions and work by declaring an unexpected "hole in the kitty" (*bucò di bilancio*) inherited from the Amato government'.¹² According to Michele Capriati's article, the 2001 DPEF (Economic and Financial Programming Document) was striking for its lengthy criticism of the CDL's predecessors in government and its excessively optimistic economic forecasts. Capriati explores the sizeable gap between expectations and outcomes and deems the government to have sought merely to 'shift the responsibility for financial reconstruction and dealing with the public debt on to future generations'. In fact, given this short-term approach to Italy's economic difficulties and failure to deal with the country's long-term structural problems, Capriati warns that one dangerous legacy of the CDL's management of Italy's finances might be that the procession of various amnesties (*condoni*) is creating a vicious circle in which people will increasingly act illegally in the expectation that they will be able to 'get away with it'.¹³

In part, the government's difficulties in running the economy stem from the make-up of the CDL coalition, whose components represent very different territorial and sectoral interests. As Ilvo Diamanti and Elisa Lello argue in their article, the centre-right's heterogeneity and lack of definition constitute an advantage in terms of attracting support, but a major impediment when in government. While Follini may have spoken gleefully of the 'end of the absolute monarchy' within the coalition following the 2004 European election results, Diamanti and Lello rightly argue that it would be impossible to handle the differences within the CDL and carry forward the business of government without a very strong leader. Whether the junior partners

like it or not, Berlusconi and Forza Italia represent the ‘glue’ of the centre-right coalition, the essential link in the chain between different parties and different territories. Without it, the CDL would either fall apart or have to reinvent itself completely. As a result, some of the most high-profile laws pushed through parliament so far—from the legal reforms to the Gasparri Law regulating the media—have been designed to serve Berlusconi’s personal interests, and AN, the Lega Nord and the UDC have often had to content themselves with symbolic concessions (frequently at the expense of one another) to brandish before their supporters, rather than genuine policy victories.¹⁴

Given the circumstances and events outlined above, one would have thought that the centre-left opposition could have made great political capital out of the government’s failures and divisions. However, as Gianfranco Pasquino discusses in his article, during its years in opposition the centre-left has had significant difficulties of its own and has proven incapable of producing even a provisional shadow cabinet leader. The recent disputes over how the next Ulivo (Olive Tree) candidate for Prime Minister should be chosen reflect the enduring reluctance of the various party oligarchs to relinquish their king-making and veto powers. As Pasquino argues, the many ‘little chiefs’ on the Left fear the loss of power which would result from the Ulivo having a strongly legitimated leader who could govern without being at their mercy. As a result of the centre-left’s inability to organize itself in a coherent fashion, Berlusconi has generally been allowed to dictate ‘the rules of the game’, making elections into personalized contests fought in the media and, therefore, on his terms. In this set-up, the television studio becomes a more important arena for the Prime Minister than parliament and, despite his admiration for the American style of politics, Berlusconi steadfastly avoids face-to-face debate with his opponents. Rather, he seeks to maintain full control over how he appears before the public by speaking unchallenged in friendly environments such as those provided by Bruno Vespa’s *Porta a porta* and the *Maurizio Costanzo Show*. Tougher journalists and his opponents simply cannot get near him on television. Partly as a reflection of their frustration that they can never subject Berlusconi to proper public questioning, the forces of the opposition have spent much of the last four years decrying his flaws to anyone who will listen. Often, this has been at the expense of developing and communicating their own solutions to the problems facing the country. However, the DS congress in February 2005 may represent a turning point in this respect, as various speakers, including Romano Prodi, resisted the temptation to embark on yet another ‘Berlusconi-bashing’ spree and instead tried to say something positive about what *they* would do in government.¹⁵

In 1994, Berlusconi was eager to portray himself as the ‘man of destiny’ who had decided to ‘sacrifice’ himself and enter the political arena in order to save Italy from falling into the arms of the communists. He offered Italians absolution for the ills of the so-called ‘First Republic’ through a framework of interpretation in which only the professional politicians were responsible for the corruption and inefficiency which had been exposed by *Tangentopoli*. The appeal to many Italians of Berlusconi ‘lay in the fact that he was an immensely successful businessman, the incarnation of many of the individual and family dreams that had their origins in the economic “miracle”, the antithesis of the career politician who was his opponent’.¹⁶ The people who brought him to power in 1994 and 2001 were often the same as the main target

audiences of his television channels: housewives, the less well-educated, the unemployed, the socially apathetic, the materialistic, those uninterested in politics etc.¹⁷ They belong to the *homo videns* species and depend heavily on the television for news and entertainment.¹⁸ Now, however, as the 2005 regional election results suggest, what Diamanti and Lello term ‘the Berlusconi model’ appears to be wearing thin. Indeed, having survived for such a long time in government, the CDL now finds itself in a position where, notwithstanding the largely friendly media treatment it receives, it is increasingly hard for it to explain why it has still not delivered on the extravagant promises of its 2001 campaign.

As we approach the next election, therefore, it is no surprise to see Berlusconi’s emphasis on values rather than policies and his return to the discourse of Italian society and politics being divided into the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, with him cast in the role of ‘saviour’, delivering the nation from the mortal dangers posed by the ‘communists’. For all his purported saintly qualities, however, it really would take a miracle for Berlusconi to achieve four of the five commitments he made in his famous *Contratto con gli Italiani*, failing which he had vowed not to stand for election again.¹⁹ In the absence of the new Italian miracle he once promised, he is likely to fight the next election not so much on results as on rhetoric. But it is a seductive rhetoric, served up largely undiluted across five national television channels, and Italy’s most successful salesman is still selling the same *storia italiana* (Italian story) of hopes and dreams.²⁰ Will his brand of doublethink triumph over the many branches of the Ulivo? Tune in next year to find out.

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Notes

1. Interview with Indro Montanelli on Enzo Biagi’s *Il fatto*, 27 March 2001.
2. See Marco Tarchi, *L’Italia populista, dal qualunquismo ai girotondi*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003; Paul Ginsborg, *Berlusconi: ambizioni patrimoniali in una democrazia mediatica*, Einaudi, Turin, 2003.
3. Giovanni Sartori, ‘Conflitto d’interessi’, in Francesco Tuccari (ed.), *Il governo Berlusconi: le parole, i fatti, i rischi*, Laterza, Rome, 2002, pp. 21–33, p. 31.
4. See for instance ‘Fit to Run Italy?’, *The Economist*, 26 April 2001; ‘Unfit to Lead Europe’, *The Economist*, 8 May 2003; ‘Doubts Cloud Berlusconi EU Debut’, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 1 July 2003; ‘Citizen Berlusconi’, *Le Monde*, 13 March 2004.
5. The Foreign Minister, Renato Ruggiero, resigned on 6 January 2002 following a very public dispute over the European Union and EMU with cabinet colleagues. Two days before Ruggiero’s resignation, the Minister for Reform, Umberto Bossi, had referred to Ruggiero in an interview as an insignificant bureaucrat. See ‘Bossi: Ruggiero è un burocrate con un’attrazione fatale per la sinistra. Non l’ha eletto il popolo, per me non conta’, *Corriere della Sera*, 4 January 2002. Claudio Scajola was forced to resign as Home Affairs Minister on 3 July 2002 after apparently telling journalists that the government consultant Marco Biagi (murdered on 19 March 2002 by a group claiming to be the Red Brigades) had been ‘a ballbreaker (*rompicoglioni*) who wanted his consultancy contract renewed’. See ‘Scorta negata a Biagi, lo sfogo di Scajola’, *Corriere della Sera*, 30 June 2002. Giulio Tremonti was forced

- to resign as Finance Minister on 3 July 2004 following severe pressure on Berlusconi from, in particular, the leader of AN, Gianfranco Fini. See, for example, 'E Fini avverte il Cavaliere: Giulio cambi o vada via', *La Repubblica*, 17 June 2004 and 'Tremonti minaccia: Lascio ma il premier resta freddo', *La Repubblica*, 2 July 2004.
6. Fuelled by stories of Bossi, Berlusconi and Tremonti meeting regularly for Monday evening dinners, the CDL was said to be divided into two main groups: a 'Northern axis' consisting of the three pro-business, 'new politicians' from Lombardy and the so-called 'subgovernment' made up of the traditionally 'pro-South' and 'pro-public sector' professional politicians of AN and the UDC.
 7. See 'Slippery Silvio', *The Economist*, 16 December 2004.
 8. Tito Boeri and Pietro Garibaldi, 'Un paese in mezzo al guado', <http://www.lavoce.info>, 4 September 2002.
 9. Three months after 11 September 2001, the deputy Finance Minister Vito Tanzi famously declared that he could already detect signs of economic recovery in the country. Contrary to Tanzi's view, the 2003 ISTAT Annual Report said that the Italian economy had been characterized by 'stagnation' throughout the whole of 2002 and 2003. On the widespread fears that the national economy might fail to recover in the near future, see the 'Considerazioni generali' of the *Rapporto Censis 2004*, <http://www.censis.it>
 10. On 2 July 2003, at the opening of Italy's Presidency of the European Union in the European Parliament, Berlusconi reacted to questions from the German MEP, Martin Schulz, by telling him that he would be perfect for the role of Kapò (prison guard) in a Nazi camp. The look of despair on the face of Gianfranco Fini spoke volumes. On 6 November 2003, during a press conference with Vladimir Putin at an EU–Russia meeting in Rome, Berlusconi defended Russia's actions in Chechnya. This provoked indignation across Europe and strong criticism from both the Commission and the European Parliament.
 11. Paul Ginsborg, *Berlusconi: Ambizioni*, p. 67.
 12. Paolo Bellucci and Martin Bull, 'Introduction: The Return of Berlusconi', in Paolo Bellucci and Martin Bull (eds), *Italian Politics: A Review*, 17, Berghahn, New York, 2002, pp. 29–47, p. 38.
 13. A brief and convincing explanation of this thesis can be found in Massimo Bordignon, 'Il circolo vizioso dei condoni', <http://www.lavoce.info>, 20 January 2004.
 14. The Bossi–Fini law and the resultant *sanatoria* (amnesty) were cases in point. See Asher Colombo and Giuseppe Sciortino, 'La legge Bossi-Fini: estremismi gridati, moderazioni implicite e frutti avvelenati' in Jean Blondel and Paolo Segatti (eds), *Politica in Italia 2003*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003, pp. 195–215. The mainly symbolic importance of this law is also demonstrated by the fact that it is impossible to enforce, see Tito Boeri, 'Bossi-Fini: quando il tagliando non basta', <http://www.lavoce.info>, 2 September 2004.
 15. See Prodi's speech, <http://www.dsonline.it>
 16. Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, Penguin, London, 2001, p. 292.
 17. See ITANES, *Perché ha vinto il centro-destra*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2001.
 18. Ilvo Diamanti, *Bianco, rosso, verde... e azzurro, mappe e colori dell'Italia politica*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003, chapter 4; Giovanni Sartori, *Homo Videns*, Laterza, Bari, 1997.
 19. Berlusconi signed the *Contratto con gli Italiani* live on the television programme *Porta a Porta* on 8 May 2001, see <http://www.forza-italia.it/silvioberlusconi/contratto.htm>
 20. The *storia italiana* referred to here was a glossy and hagiographical public relations pamphlet celebrating Silvio Berlusconi's life, sent to every Italian household in the run-up to the 2001 election.