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Introduction: A mountain giving birth to a mouse? On the impact and legacy of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy

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Love him or loathe him, Silvio Berlusconi is widely assumed to be Europe's most remarkable politician of recent decades, one who has not only affected the nature of electoral competition or the shape of the party system in Italy, but one who has influenced the country's political agenda to the extent that he himself and his role in politics have for long periods been the most important issues around which party competition has taken place.

It is difficult to think of another European leader who has enjoyed such remarkable political success over such a long period of time. Having allegedly relinquished the leadership of his business activities and entered politics 'on loan' as a 'non-politician' wishing to 'save Italy' from communist rule after the demise of all major centrist governing parties, as he argued in his first televised political speech of 26 January 1994,[1] Berlusconi became the fulcrum of one of two electoral alliances that were competing for government – that is, the coalition of the centre–right – in the sense that its unity seemed for long to depend almost entirely on his continued popularity. Such was the effectiveness of the electoral machine created by Berlusconi that his Forza Italia (FI) party ended up as the most voted of all parties at the first election it ever contested – that of 1994. He then led the centre–right without interruption for a good 20 years (whether his party was in government or in opposition), winning three general elections against his opponents on the centre–left (in 1994, 2001 and 2008), losing two by small margins (in 1996 and 2006), and fighting one that produced no overall winner (in 2013). One would be hard pressed to find another European leader who, having lost a *second* general election *to the same opponent*, not just survived as a politician, but went on to lead his or her party into another contest, eventually *winning* it (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2009). And yet this is precisely what Berlusconi did in 2008, after being defeated by Romano Prodi for a second time two years earlier. It would equally be difficult to find many other examples of western European leaders who could remain in control of a large political party (a minor split notwithstanding), despite having been banned from holding public office, thrown out of Parliament and been ordered to do community service due to a conviction for tax fraud. Berlusconi went through all this in 2013 then to play a leading role as the representative of the opposition in a process of revision of Italy's constitution and electoral law.[2] He is the leader who (after the 2008 election) has

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commanded the largest parliamentary majority in the history of the Republic; and he has been the longest continuously serving Prime Minister (PM) in Italian post-war history.

One reason for the media entrepreneur's longevity as a political leader is that he was able to represent the grievances of large sections of the Italian population on important issues such as, for instance, taxation. Another was that he never relinquished control (either directly, or through close associates and family members) of the vast media and financial empire he had created before entering the political competition, a resource the 'personal' (Calise 2007; McDonnell 2013) parties he founded and led, that is, FI and the Popolo della Libertà (PDL), made large use of. Yet a third factor involved in his success has been his enormous self-confidence, optimism and stamina, and his determination to remain in power against all the odds. It seems intuitive, therefore, that FI's leader must have been able to leave a mark on his country and that Italy might still be forced to deal with the legacy of this very divisive figure for years to come. In fact, the analysis offered in this special issue does support the former assertion, however suggests that the second may in fact be rather unlikely.

Of course a great deal has already been written about the supposed impact of Berlusconi on various facets of Italian politics and his likely legacy in the country, so some explanation is required as to why we are proposing yet a further contribution now, at the end of 2014. Two things need to be said in relation to this. First, as far as the issue of timing is concerned, we should say that we do not wish to instigate fresh debate because we are convinced that Berlusconi's departure from politics must be imminent, or because we believe that he is 'finished' as a political leader. This is a claim that has often been made by the press in the past, and which has wrongly been repeated in recent months, too.[3] On the contrary, far from having left the political scene, Berlusconi is still playing a role from the opposition benches in no less than reforming the country's constitution, as we have said. However, FI is now facing, and will continue to face in the foreseeable future, significant competition from western Europe's most successful new party: the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S – Five Star Movement). The M5S, which went from 0 to 25% of the national vote in just five years, very much, although not exclusively, at the expense of Berlusconi's party, and also due to the latter's crisis (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 68–69), has stolen Berlusconi's thunder by focusing on issues that have been at the core of his message for many years. These are, for instance, the proposal to lower taxes (e.g. by abolishing a much despised property tax on people's primary homes), harsh criticism of the Italian political class (of which Berlusconi, once 'new', is now one of the most seasoned members) and constant attacks against the EU and the euro. Although, as we write, it is still impossible to conceive of a centre–right electoral alliance/coalition in which FI did not play an important role, it has also become increasingly unrealistic for Berlusconi to think that he can see off the threat posed to his party by the M5S in whatever time of active politics is left to him (he is 78), regroup the centre–right coalition under his leadership and then fulfil the role of fulcrum of Italian politics once again that was his in the past. Berlusconi's recent court convictions, including a seven year ban on holding public office against which he has appealed; other legal battles that still await him in the near future; the loss of about six million votes in recent elections; the challenge of the M5S and the electoral success of the centre–left in the most recent European elections of 2014: all these would make fulfilling such an objective a truly miraculous achievement. Therefore, as we approach the end of 2014, it seems clear that Berlusconi's 'best' years as a party and coalition leader must now be behind him – which makes it possible to start reflecting, not only on what he has done, but, more importantly perhaps, on what he may leave behind.

An important reason why we and the contributors to this special issue propose to add to the already rich Berlusconi literature is because it remains to be established to what extent, and in

what areas, Berlusconi's impact has actually been *decisive* – in the sense that, had he not existed or occupied the position he did, the changes would not have come about or would have come about to an extent or in ways *significantly* different. This is a question that is worth asking because it makes a considerable difference to how we assess the quality of Italian democracy in recent years.

That is, there is a widespread sense of disappointment with the results of the collapse of the so-called 'First Republic'. For example, it was widely anticipated that the early 1990s party-system transformation – with the emergence of two, centre–left and centre–right, coalitions each competing for overall majorities of seats – would bring greater political accountability and thus significant improvements to the quality of democracy, whereas in terms of both policy-making processes (e.g. executive stability) and policy outputs (e.g. in areas like corruption and the public debt) there are few willing to argue that improvements have been more than minimal, if that. It is widely assumed that much of the responsibility can be attributed to the actions and inactions of Berlusconi and leaders like him – to things like his decision to withdraw support for the Bicameral Constitutional reform commission in the 1990s, thus obstructing the process of regime transition events at the beginning of the decade were thought to have initiated; to his abuses of office for personal ends, thus perpetuating a climate of impropriety allowing corruption to flourish; to his opposition, fearful as he was for his popularity, to spending cuts, with all of the well-known consequences for the public debt: the list is endless. But, leaving aside these specific instances, if it is reasonable to think that the problems of Italy's democracy would have existed in pretty much the same form and extent without Berlusconi, then it could perhaps be argued that Italy really *is* the '*democrazia anomala*' it is widely made out to be: since things would have been little different had others been in Berlusconi's position during the years when he was Prime Minister, then presumably the problems have to be explained by reference to systemic factors rather than by reference to the agency of specific individuals. By contrast, if we can argue that Italian democracy during the years of Berlusconi's power would not have had its dysfunctional qualities without actions only he, and no one else in his position, would have taken, then our judgement is likely to be very different. Granted, no specific individual's, or group of specific individuals', place in history is so significant that their actions can bear the entire weight of historical explanation. On the other hand, the opposite position – the position occupied by social determinists for whom the choices of individuals are inconsequential because their actions are determined entirely by social forces – is equally untenable; for it precludes understanding by falling victim to the problem of infinite regress – from which a reference to reasons or intentions, divine or otherwise, provides the only possible escape.[4] So convincing historical explanations in general, and therefore explanations of recent Italian political history in particular, seem likely to require references to *both* structure *and* agency in varying combinations; and this being the case, the validity of an historical explanation is dependent on us being able to work out when the choices and actions of specific individuals, like Berlusconi, have been decisive in the course of historical change and when, instead, social forces must be recognised as having been decisive.

Although we and our contributors cannot hope finally to resolve these issues here, we can add to the existing work on Berlusconi's impact and legacy with the aim of contributing to the issues' eventual resolution. With this in mind we may note that there seems to be broad agreement on some important aspects of Berlusconi's influence and impact on Italy, of the kind only he could have exercised – the most obvious example being his contribution to fostering bipolarism after the collapse of the First Republic (Pasquino 2007), this thanks to his role in helping legitimise and bring into the mainstream parties which, until the 1990s, had been excluded from power: the post-Fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI – Italian Social Movement), later Alleanza

Nazionale (AN – National Alliance) and the regional populists of the Lega Nord (LN – Northern League). The broad and diverse right-wing alliance that Berlusconi was able to put together back in 1994 – by convincing these two parties, in many ways antithetical in ideological terms, to enter separate electoral agreements with his newly created Forza Italia, therefore circumventing the need to be formally allied to each other – was thus able to compete for power with the left during the two decades that followed, as we have mentioned above.

The two coalitions have alternated in power since then, as is common in many western European countries, but had not happened in Italy during the previous decades of Christian Democratic rule. It may not be surprising, therefore, that, following this introduction, this special issue continues with an article authored by Mark Donovan which assesses Berlusconi's contribution to re-shaping Italy's party system, and finds that his impact on the country's party politics has in fact been massive. As Donovan argues in his piece, not only was Berlusconi the principal architect of party–system bipolarity in the years after 1992 but his actions were decisive in ensuring that it would be an unusual form of bipolarity, one that underpinned the alternation in government that is associated with 'moderate pluralism', but that also featured gladiatorial confrontation of a kind one more readily associates with 'polarised pluralism'. This was essentially due to the conflict of interests associated with Berlusconi's role as PM and owner of the three largest private television stations in the country, as well as his pursuit of *ad personam* legislation – for instance legislation that would assist him in his role as an entrepreneur, and/or help him in some of his trials.

In addition to this, Berlusconi promoted an extreme personalisation of politics. Not only did the success of his model in this respect drive his centre–left opponents to attempt to imitate it, but his parties, FI and the PDL, were entirely novel creatures, created by him and for him (McDonnell 2013): parties whose rules, organisation, values and identity were given by him; parties to enable him to further his economic interests and to satisfy his personal cravings to be at the centre of attention by deploying his skills as a communicator; in short, parties that he actually *owned*. Uniquely, therefore, it was not the party that brought votes to Berlusconi, but Berlusconi who brought votes to his party.

It is for this very reason that Berlusconi's legacy on party politics in Italy is, in the end, likely to be inversely proportional to the impact he appears to have exercised on it during his political career. That is, his inability to institutionalise what were, and, in FI's case, still are, 'personal' parties, meant that he failed to construct an enduring conservative party that could contain the growth of anti-political sentiments provoked by gladiatorial politics – what would have been an important political legacy, and indeed one Berlusconi himself repeatedly argued he wished to leave behind (Berlusconi 2006). Interestingly, to the extent that we can talk of a legacy left by Berlusconi on party politics, this appears to be one he did not intend to leave: this is because his ineffectiveness as a government leader and reformer appears to have paved the way for the emergence of the M5S and the success of the centre–left leader and actual PM Matteo Renzi, thus sowing the seeds of Berlusconi's own possible political demise at their hands.

Rather similar conclusions are reached in the third of the articles hosted by this special issue – that is Cristian Vaccari's contribution on Berlusconi's influence and legacy in the field of political communication. Here, Berlusconi's short-term impact on political communication and language is said to have been considerable, but his legacy is again judged to be limited – in this case due to the growing relevance of the new (particularly social) media, an area in which he has been less innovative and generally outperformed by his competitors. Thus, while Berlusconi pioneered the use of modern campaigning techniques centred on television, and while he was able to define the language with which issues were discussed during the 20 years of his political career, his exploitation of new media technologies and platforms has been reluctant to say the

least. To this one might add that even had he been somewhat less reluctant, he would have likely been defeated by the *logic* and *growing significance* of the new media technology *per se*; for, this being by its very nature dialogic and interactive (indeed to a large extent anarchical) Berlusconi is completely unable to control it. Moreover, as Vaccari points out, Berlusconi did not even invent the campaign techniques he used and they are not without comparison in other western democracies. And while his language has left a significant mark on political discourse, again, he did not invent it *ex novo* but to a large extent appropriated linguistic formulae, like 'taking to the field', that were already quite widespread. It is therefore at least open to discussion whether the popularity of certain key-words and expressions Berlusconi has made use of during his long career can be regarded as an aspect of *his* legacy, or rather the outcome of a more complex process in which he has certainly played a role.

Perhaps the most common charge levied against Berlusconi is that he has been able to exercise some sort of authoritarian cultural hegemony thanks to the financial and media resources at his disposal. And yet, as Cinzia Padovani points out in the fourth contribution offered in this special issue, this claim fails to take into account 'the many examples of opposition to and criticism of Berlusconi that media professionals have demonstrated in their work', not to mention the activism, both through the new and the mainstream media, of citizens opposed to Berlusconi and his governments. Consequently, the more gloomy assessments of Berlusconi's impact on the quality of Italian democracy, assessments deriving largely from his media ownership and his conflict of interests, must at the very least be qualified by noting that, although his influence has been undoubtedly negative, countervailing pressures mean that democracy remains fundamentally well in Italy. Therefore, Berlusconi simply cannot be the one leaving behind a non-pluralist media sector upon his departure, since, whatever his original intentions, he has obviously *not* taken control of all, or even a majority, of the media in the country while at the apex of his powers, nor has he ever managed to silence what has been a vocal political, social and cultural opposition to him (Albertazzi et al. 2009).

To judge from Cristina Dallara's contribution, when we turn to look at the other area that has become a distinguishing feature of the Berlusconi era, namely, his conflict with the judiciary, we must equally reach the conclusion that – while Berlusconi's activism in this area must be noted – his impact and legacy do not add up to much even here. As Dallara points out, it is true that Berlusconi's personal battles with the so-called '*toghe rosse*' ('red robes', i.e. allegedly left-wing prosecutors) created a huge political cleavage around the issue and arguably distracted public attention from the organisational problems of the justice system, which remain serious. Clearly no other leader has similarly impacted on Italy's views of its justice system in recent decades as Berlusconi has done – indeed no other leader had such pressing interest to do so. But, on the other hand, argues Dallara, thanks to the strong institutional framework embodied in the 1948 constitution, the Italian judiciary has been able to resist attempts to modify judicial procedures and organisation to advantage Berlusconi in solving his judicial troubles and so has continued to guarantee an effective mechanism of checks and balances. Substantial reform of the judicial system thus remained unaccomplished, though it was frequently announced. Hence, despite Berlusconi's populist exasperation with constitutional restraints and checks and balances (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013, 355–359), nothing he has actually *done* has changed Italy's status as a fully fledged liberal democracy: the state and its institutions continue to be founded on the rule of law, regardless of how well or badly the principle is applied; the 1948 constitution remains intact.

As Paul Furlong points out in his contribution to our issue, Berlusconi's fundamentally Bonapartist belief that the majority leader has a popular mandate to govern and should be able to

do so as he wishes free of constitutional constraints frequently brought him into conflict, not only with the judiciary, but with the Presidency, too. Ironically, this has drawn presidents into public debates in ways that have widened the scope of the presidency to the degree that in November 2011, through the involvement of Giorgio Napolitano in responding to external pressures, Berlusconi was obliged to resign as prime minister, an episode that was highly curious both politically and constitutionally: in effect, Berlusconi had been dismissed by the president who thereby gave Italians an idea of how a semi-presidential system *à la française* might work in the country. This is another example of a legacy unintended – or at least one that has been left not in the *way* that Berlusconi intended; for as Furlong notes, the convergence of Berlusconi's personal and political ambitions did lead him, at times, to argue precisely for the virtues of semi-presidentialism (hoping, no doubt, that he would one day be able to get the job of president himself).

The topic covered by the last article featured by our special issue, authored by Stephen Gundle, is Berlusconi's legacy in the realm of public consciousness and memory. The centre–right leader has been a master of carefully crafting his own image and choreographing his political appearance, as the official launch of his political career on 26 January 1994 via a video message produced by his own television company and aired by his own television stations clearly shows. Having considered the ways in which Berlusconi has striven to take control of how he may be remembered, thanks to a rich repertoire of personal images he himself has put into circulation, Gundle underlines the lack of originality of Berlusconi's visual repertoire, as well as reliance on pre-existing models. As we have pointed out above, this is the same conclusion Vaccari had reached when discussing Berlusconi's political discourse, providing further support to the view that Berlusconi has been a skilled interpreter and 'recycler' of images and key words, but never an innovator. This ultimately leads Gundle to wonder whether: 'In the ultimately unpredictable machinery of memory, the media aesthetics of the Berlusconi phenomenon may simply lose specificity on account of their generic nature. Once compelling, they may one day merely arouse period curiosity'. Despite Berlusconi's efforts to circulate hagiographical narratives about and uplifting images of himself, therefore, even Berlusconian aesthetics may in the end turn out to be 'time bound', its legacy ultimately short-lived.

It appears, therefore, that despite the obvious advantage of being able to control a large media group while leading a political party, the electoral success, the ability to stage one 'comeback' after the other as PM and the undoubted impact on various aspects of Italian social and political life, Berlusconi's overall legacy may well in the end turn out to be limited. Taken as a whole, the analyses presented in this issue thus confirm Gianfranco Pasquino's claim that the Italy Berlusconi will leave behind is unlikely to look radically different from the one he found, insofar as he was 'unable to subvert the existing institutions, especially Parliament, the judiciary and the presidency of the republic' (2013, 16). Even the only significant reform Berlusconi *has* managed to introduce while in power – that is, a much criticised electoral law passed in 2005, some articles of which were declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court nine years later, and which the current Italian government is on course to replacing with a different one in the near future – is likely to be forgotten, since its apparent inadequacy has condemned it to be short-lived. This is not to deny that Berlusconi's impact has been pronounced in some areas – and, to return to our original point made above, that *only* he, given his unique position, political connections before entering the political field, financial and media means and also personal qualities, could have impacted on his country in the way he did in those areas during a career spanning over 20 years. This, as we have seen, seems particularly true of his shaping of Italy's political and media systems, as well as the features and style of political communication

in the country in the last two decades. Importantly, however, it seems doubtful that Berlusconi will be able to leave a lasting legacy even in these areas. As for the features of Italy's political system, the M5S has put an end to bipolarism in the country, thus wiping out what has been regarded as Berlusconi's finest achievement; as for political communication, while Berlusconi has been able fully to exploit 'one-way-only', 'one-size-fits-all' communication, carried mainly by terrestrial television, he has failed to adapt to the times and make good use of the interactive and participatory features of the new media; finally, as for the features of the television market Berlusconi will leave behind, things look very different today from what they did only 10 years ago. Despite Berlusconi having been successful throughout his political career in helping his Fininvest consolidate its dominant position in the media market, the commercial success of new actors – notably, but not only, twenty-first century Fox's-owned, Sky Italia, which in 2014 can boast 5 million subscribers and a 33% market share[5] means that the anomalous television duopoly that has characterised Italy since the 1980s, is now also being dismantled.

In other words, the evidence suggests that the mountain of *Berlusconismo* has given birth to the mouse of (likely) limited lasting legacy. Or, in other words, and despite the FI leader's best efforts, far from having become the 'sick man of Europe' (Mammone and Veltri 2010), Italy remains a vibrant democracy. With its many limits, contradictions and weaknesses, and with much to be desired in terms of accountability, it is nonetheless a healthily pluralistic one at that.

Notes

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8-uIYqnk5A (accessed October 21, 2014).
2. Since taking over from his predecessor Enrico Letta in February 2014, the current prime minister, Matteo Renzi, has instigated a process of reform which is very likely to lead to several changes (including to Italy's constitution), notably a reform of the electoral law and of the composition and role of the Senate.
3. For example, http://www.itv.com/news/update/2013-09-18/silvio-berlusconis-political-career-nears-end/ (accessed September 19, 2013).
4. In a world in which everything is predetermined and intentions have no effects, attempts to explain a circumstance or event have to refer to social forces which in their turn must be explained by reference to other social forces *ad infinitum*. The only possible escape is via reasons and intentions because only they can offer understanding, in the sense of rendering action *intelligible*, that is, enabling us to imagine ourselves acting similarly were we in the position of the people whose actions we seek to explain. Thus only they can quieten the demand for an answer to the question 'why?'. So ultimately, social determinism is metaphysical and its attempt entirely to eliminate human agency is a failure.
5. See http://skycorporate.sky.it/page/it/skycorporate/profilo (accessed October 1, 2014).

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