Italy: The decline of a Parliamentary Party Government*

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I. Introduction: party government and *partitocrazia*

Definable as a party government is a government whose members (head of government and ministers) are of political party provenance and whose policies are defined by the party. Thus understood, a party government is a government in which the parties control appointments and of which they influence policies. From this point of view, postwar Italian democracy belongs to the family of democratic party governments. The Italian political parties - recognized moreover by the 1948 constitution as the only actors in the governmental process (article 49 runs: "all citizens have the right to associate freely in parties in order to concur democratically in determining national policy") - invariably (until 1992) controlled government appointments and policies. To use Katz's (1987) well-known conceptualization, that of Italy is a case of marked "partyness of government" (i.e. the parties' capacity to control government appointments and policies), although it is not dissimilar from other European parliamentary democracies.

However, and it is here that the Italian case acquires its distinctive character, this partyness of government has come about in a context of a political economy extraordinarily favourable to the parties: both on the side of the state (where the parties have been able to act as surrogates for a traditionally weak and colonizable administration) and on the side of the economy, on account of the extremely broad and intrusive presence of the state in productive activities and services. Thus never challenged and long unchallengeable by any other political or institutional actor, the Italian political parties were able to transform themselves into authentic oligopolist public-capital corporations, able to condition not only government appointments and policies but also a large part of the Italian political economy (through control of the appointments and choices of banks, firms, financial institutes, welfare agencies, etc.). Consequently, again following Katz, also high has been the "party governmentness" of Italian democracy, by which is meant the capacity of the parties to extend their control to extraordinarly broad areas of economic and social life. Here resides a specific distinction between party government and *partitocrazia* which is analytically critical in order not to confuse the Italian case with that of other party democracies (Lijphart 1984). If one bears this distinction in mind, it is possible to understand why the crisis of the *partitocrazia* has had systemic origins (that is, it is due to the crisis of the spe-

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cific party intermediation that had arisen in the relationship between state and society, Fabbrini 1995a) while the decline of party government, which was naturally affected by that crisis, had instead more directly institutional origins (being due to the exhaustion of the model of parliamentary democracy adopted in Italy). With the consequence that the superseding of the *partitocrazia* does not (necessarily) entail abandonment of party government.

In fact, the decline of Italian party government (which began in 1992 on the wave of the explosion detonated by *Tangentopoli* and accelerated after 1993 by the *de facto* abolition by referendum on April 18, 1993 of the proportional electoral system and then, after parliamentary approval on following August 4 of a new electoral law, by establishment of 3/4 majoritarian representation on the basis of a uninominal constituency and 1/4 proportional representation with a list vote on a district basis, Katz 1995) may lead to different outcomes (the boosting or curbing of the government role of the parties) in relation to the institutional perspective possibly chosen in reforming the government system (Fabbrini 1995b). Here, however, I shall only concern myself with the historical evolution of Italian party government (i.e. of the role of the parties in determining the policies and in controlling the appointments of the government), which I shall assess both at the level of government formation and at that of the organization and decision-making process of the executive. And I shall do so by comparing the periods before and after 1992 (till the elections of April 1996), thereby seeking to argue the thesis that the decline of the Italian (parliamentary) party government - since it has occurred in the absence of serious attempts to reform the government system - engendered an institutional hybrid which I call "residual semipresidential party government" (or better: semipresidentialism with residual party government).

If we assume, as does Vassallo (1994), that a *residual* party government is one in which the parties have little or no control over its appointments and over its policies, while an *organic* party government is one in which the parties exercise close control over both (and, to anticipate a typology that I shall use later, that a party government is *spartitorio* [1] when the parties control only government appointments but have no interest in controlling its policies), then one may say that in July 1992, with the formation of the Amato government, and then especially with its reshuffling in the following February and March 1993, there began a phase of the so called "technical governments" [2] - unprecedented in the history of the Italian republic - which lasted till January 1996, where I stop my analysis, connoted by party governments with low (if not zero) partyness of government. The point is that this low partyness of government has been matched by the marked influence of the president of the republic, almost as if the legitimation of govern-

1 I leave the Italian word for its difficult English translation. Roughly speaking, *spartitorio* is a party governemnt mainly interested in dividing up the spoils of power.

2 For "technical" governments are meant those governemnts whose ministers are, in their majority, non parliamentarians, being chosen for their supposed technical expertise. They are: the Amato government (July 1992-April 1993), the Ciampi government (May 1993-April 1994) and the Dini government (January 1995-January 1996: although it lasted three months more presiding over the interlude period between its resignation and the new national elections of April 1996). Moreover, in the cases of the Ciampi and Dini both were not parliamentarians. This phase registered the exception of the brief period of the "political" Berlusconi government (May 1994-December 1994). In any case, since the end of the Eighties Italian politics has been growingly influenced by non-professional politicians (Regonini 1993).

ments has passed from the parties to the president. Whence the institutional hybrid as defined above.

II. The process of government formation

A. *1948-1992: discontinuity within continuity*

That in this period the parties maintained control over government appointments and policies (which policies, we will see below) there is no doubt, although there is equally no doubt that this control assumed different modalities according to different *political seasons*. Cotta writes (1994: 122): "the modalities of government formation (and the specular ones of their dissolution) are one of the central planks in Italian criticism of the *partitocrazia*, but also one of the cornerstones of the definition of party government". Why have these modalities been the object of criticism? To answer the question, it is necessary to have in mind the framework of processes and relationships within which Italian governments were formed in the protracted postwar period (Fabbrini 1994a; Hine 1993). The highly proportional electoral system adopted in constitution-making debate (although not formalized in the constitution), combined with a multiparty system following a dynamic of polarized pluralism (Sartori 1982), were both the cause and effect of a stably closed electoral market and invariably gave rise to an electoral outcome that reflected the relationships among the political parties, rather than a clearcut political majority (Fusaro 1995).

Of course, given the characteristics of the party system - that is, given the presence of a strong anti-system party on the left and a less strong anti-system party on the right, neither with sufficient legitimacy to assume governmental responsibility (the former for international reasons of geopolitical alignment, the latter for internal historical reasons) - government majorities were inevitably markedly centrist in character, generally taking the form of majorities by default, that is for want of anything better (Pasquino 1987). After all, as Duverger (1988) has pointed out, in democracies in which alternation is not possible government is *from* the centre, whereas in those in which it is possible, government is *with* the centre. The fact is, however, that the electoral market, given the close and enduring bond of ideological identity between large sections of the electorate and the main parties (the DC, or Christian Democrats, and the PCI, or Communists, especially), permanently assumed the form of a closed electoral market in the sense (to use the apt phrase of Mannheimer and Sani 1987: 155) that internally to it "the fight between the parties in the field [could be] intense and head-on, but it did not [serve] to change a single vote".

Thus, in the presence of a multi-party system polarized to extremes that made access to government impossible for the second party, the proportional electoral system exalted the role of the centrist parties over that of the electors in the formation of governments. The electors did no more than write a sort of blank cheque for the parties, utilizing elections to affirm their allegiance rather than assert their choice. And this is why the centrist parties fulfilled their role of government-formation in the phase subsequent to the elections, activating a long-drawn-out bargaining process aimed at establishing the exact hierarchy of power within the government coalition. In short, as happens in all consensual democracies in which governments are formed by post-electoral negotiation (Laver and Shepsle 1994), the Italian (centrist) parties were the sole protagonists in the process of government-formation.

Now, although the government majorities had inevitably a markedly centrist character, and although their party composition was largely predictable, their precise ministerial composition was anything but a foregone conclusion. I use the expression 'ministerial composition' deliberately because it is here that Cotta's criticism resides. Once the terms of the inter-party agreement had been defined (*Centrismo* in the 1950s; the *Centro-Sinistra* in the 1960s; *Solidarietà Nazionale* in the 1970s; the *Pentapartito* in the 1980s), the parties exercised their government-forming role more in the distribution of government appointments among the coalition parties than in defining the government policies. In short, their principal concern was posts more than policy directions. To the extent that within the framework of the inter-party accord, elaboration of programmes and the defining of government priorities resolved themselves into the ritual celebration of commitments and problems without any systematic selection from the electoral manifestoes of the coalition parties (Mastropaolo and Slater 1987).

Then, analysing the Italian party government experience, temporal specifications are in order. They are in order because party government can be conceived as a *continuum* along which one can plot different combinations between party control of appointments and policies, and especially because irregular and at any rate reversible shifts can be created between one combination and another. Using the only empirically relevant benchmark combination for Italian history of this period - that between an organic party government and a *spartitorio* party government - we may say that the post-war period (till 1992, of course) was marked by alternating phases of (generally brief) *organic* party government and of (generally long) *spartitorio* party government. With the analytically important specification that the phases of organic party government coincided with periods in which the parties had to define or redefine the terms of the accords among themselves (those, that is, which inaugurated what I called the four principal *political seasons* of the time), while those of *spartitorio* party government coincided with periods of administration (of and internally to) already defined accords.

In fact, once the policy-programme framework had been defined, and given the impossibility of alternation, the parties could attend first to the distribution of governments posts and then, especially, to particularist management of government action. Why 'particularist'? Again Cotta (1994: 127) has proposed a interesting classification of government policies pursued in post-war Italy, which are ranked at three distinct levels. The first of them, which Cotta calls the level of metapolicies, is that at which the "fundamental arrangements" of the political regime are defined; the second, called the level of "medium-range" policy, is that at which "important aspects of economic, social, foreign, etc. policy" are defined; the third, the level of "micropolicies", is that of definition of "the ways in which particular interests are to be handled". On the basis of this classification, we may say that the phases of *spartitorio* party government coincided with the party control of micropolicies, while only in phases of organic party government did the parties have to concern themselves with medium-range policies. Of course, the parties (all of them, but the two largest ones, the DC and the PCI, especially) never ceased to occupy themselves with meta-policies, apart from anything else in order to sustain that particular ideological-cultural cleavage (communism vs. anticommunism) on which Italian consensual democracy had come to structure itself (thus distinguishing itself from the other consensual democracies instead motivated by ethnic-cultural cleavages).

Although the over-riding concern of the government parties was to control micropolicies, the latter, in their turn, proved extraordinarily conducive to compromise between the government majority and the out-of-government minority. This

point should be stressed (Pizzorno 1993). Whereas in Italian consensual democracy, unlike others of ethnic-cultural character, the government could never had developed into a Grand Coalition of the main parties, because of the *conventio ad excludendum* which penalized the second party (the PCI) for its placement in the international cleavage of the Cold War, some involvement of the PCI in the decision-making process was necessary, given its electoral and political importance. Thus, since it was impossible to integrate the PCI into the government majority (and, of course, even more impossible to turn it into the fulcrum for an alternating pole), the only recourse was to create a second (semi-ufficial) government majority in the legislature. Naturally, these two distinct majorities could co-exist because the government system progressively structured itself along polycentric [3] lines (Cotta 1987); progressively but on institutional premises nevertheless specifically established by the constitution.

Italian parliamentary democracy was therefore characterized by horizontal relationships between legislature and executive, and not by the vertical ones (in favour of the latter) distinctive of the other parliamentary democracies both majoritarian and consensual (ethnically-culturally based, however) (Cotta 1991). In Italy both parliament and government retained their respective institutional autonomy, internally structuring themselves, moreover, on an equivalent horizontal and (at any rate) anti-centralist pattern. As we shall see, in the executive this structuring assumed the features of government "by individual ministries"; that is, a government in which the (ministries of the various) coalition parties were granted full autonomy in running the area of government assigned to them. In the legislature, this structuring assumed the features of a diffused-power parliament on account of its undifferentiated bicameralism, of the committees with law-giving powers which organized its work, and of the scant coordinating capacity of the parliamentary party groups (especially those of the centrist parties). In a parliament with little or no institutional centralization, with poorly cohesive parliamentary groups, it was evidently possible to fashion majorities which varied (with respect to the official government majority) according to the various issues under discussion.

Since confrontation on medium-range policies (those, that is, which marked out the government majority with respect to the parties excluded from it: consider economic or foreign policies) was temporally limited to the period of the opening of a new political season [4], while the regularity of the process of government was set by micro-policies, and since the latter (because of their sectorial nature) could not mark out a majority from a minority, micro-policies showed to be extraordinarily fertile terrain for the formation of semi-official majorities (in the legislature) different from the official one (in the executive). After all, micro-policies were also indispensable for the principal party of the left, which was excluded from government and knew that it could never enter, so that it could strengthen links with its electorate and demonstrate to it its legislative efficiency despite such exclusion. At the same time, the predominance of micro-policies in the action of the majority and minority parties transformed them into arenas of corporative interests and thereby exposing them to the danger of political and

3 Polycentric is a system (of government) with multiple center of decision-making power.

4 It is important to bear in mind that the Italian governmental majorities were set up by default, that is for want of anything better. Consequently, the confrontation on medium-range policies could not last too much for the risk to show the internal fragility of the majority.

organizational fragmentation. Whence the periodic recourse to meta-policies, since only these, given their ideological nature, could maintain the borders among parties (and between the two main ones in particular) otherwise largely indistinguishable in terms of the interests that they represented. The outcome was that micro-policies and meta-policies fuelled (and justified) each other, to the inevitable detriment of the only policy level, the intermediate one, able programmatically to connote a party government.

There thus arose something akin to reciprocal guarantees between the two main parties and between the two institutions of government. With its involvement in legislative decision-making the PCI could neutralize the *conventio ad excludendum* in its sfavour in the executive, consequentely allowing the DC to dominate the latter but without achieving majoritarian control over the whole governmental process (Di Palma 1990). Moreover, there is considerable testimony that the same ministerial composition of governments, given the above-mentioned reciprocal guarantees, although directly determined by the preferences of the parties in the government coalition, it was, with the Sixties, also indirectly influenced by those of the parties excluded from it (i.e the PCI); indirectly because they were expressed by default through indication of the ministers they did not wish to see installed in ministries of particular importance.

B. *After 1992: continuity in discontinuity*

The crisis of the *partitocrazia* made manifest in 1992 drastically curtailed the role of the parties in government formation. Indeed, the national elections of 5-6 April 1992 presented the country with a new situation: the four-party government majority (DC, PSI or Socialist, PSDI or Socialdemocrats and PLI or Liberals - but no longer the PRI or Republicans) which had sustained the seventh Andreotti government (formed in April 1991) emerged in reduced form from the elections, whithout, however, a new majority coming about. A contradictory effect of an electoral market which was beginning to open itself up (Mannheimer and Sani 1994). The new parliament, already precarious at the level of inter-party power relationships, was even more shaky at the level of institutional legitimation, due to the torrent of *avvisi di garanzia* (writs of judicial investigation) that had politically decimated the parties of the previous government majority (Ricolfi 1993). As if this were not enough, once installed, the new parliament found itself faced with the problem (of great institutional importance at that stage) of electing the new president of the republic. Right from the first round of voting, it was evident that the previous government majority, reeling from the onslaught waged by the electors and the judges, was unable to obtain the election of its own nominee and, somewhat humiliated, had to cut its losses by supporting another candidate (the just-elected chairman of the senate, Scalfaro) who, though a member of the party dominant until that time (the DC), had distinguished himself by maintaining his distance from the erstwhile leaders of the five-party and then four-party majority (i.e. Craxi from the PSI, Andreotti and Forlani from the DC). As soon as he was elected, both because he wanted to stress his different outlook from the previus president (Cossiga, who was an outspoken critic of the republican "partitocratic" institutions) and because he was deeply convinced of it, the new president declared himself to be an "absolute" admirer and servant of parliamentary democracy. But, faced with a party system in growing disarray and with a parliament unable to generate a reliable government majority, the new president of the republic left immediately the previous declaration in the air. And in fact, "malgré monsieur le Président", the presidential powers, which were after all ambiguously regulated by the Constitution (Merlini 1995), passed through a dramatic process of expansion, since 1992.

Consider the formal power of nomination of the president of the council of ministers (as provided for to the president of the republic by art. 92.2). Although presidents of the republic has been traditionally obliged to precede the formal "nomination" (or *nomina*) with the informal "appointment" (or *incarico,* not envisaged, of course, by the Constitution) - because candidates for the presidency of the council of ministers had to verify by their own their proposed government's degree of acceptability to the parties, with the result that many informal "appointments" were never transformed into formal "nominations" - with 1992 the boundaries between the two became blurred (Ceccanti and Fabbrini 1995: 262-3). Already with Amato, and then especially with Ciampi, the president of the republic announced an "appointment" that was universally perceived as a "nomination". Hence the two appointees were able to "scioglere positivamente la riserva" (literally "positively dissolve the reserve", i.e report to the president of the republic that their goverment may plausibly obtaine the confidence - or the non-no-confidence - of the two chambers of parliament) in record time: ten days in Amato's case and indeed only two in Ciampi's (whereas, for example, twenty-eight days were required in the case of De Mita in 1988). Thus, amid deligitimated parties and a parliament unable to produce alternative majorities, an unprecedented area of influence was created for the "governmental" action of the president of the republic. Starting from the task of choosing a president of the council of ministers able to marshal 'crosswise' support both in parliament and in public opinion.

Furthermore, while still evident in the inauguration of the Amato government was the influence exerted by the parties of the previous majority on the distribution of government posts, as well as on the same choice of the candidate for the presidency of the council of ministers, this influence progressively dwindled until, in February and March 1993, fully five ministers were forced to resign because they had received *avvisi di garanzia* (although only four of them were subsequently replaced), followed by the replacement of a further three ministers (the first because he had resigned in dissent with government policy, the second on his transfer to another ministry post, and the third because he was seconded to run the recently-created ministry of privatization). In all these cases the influence of the president of the republic predominated over that of the four parties DC, PSI, PSDI and PLI, which nevertheless continued to support the government (Amato 1994). And it was an influence that reached its culmination with the formation of the Ciampi government in May 1993, as regards both the choice of the president of the council (amongst other things, Ciampi was then governor of the bank of Italy, and thus became the first non-parliamentarian president of the council in the history of the republic) and the composition of the list of ministers (explicitly drawn up jointly by the president of the republic and the candidate for the presidency of the council with ample recourse to technicians and university professors).

In short, there is considerable evidence that, in the reshuffling of the Amato government and in the composition of the Ciampi government, the leaders of the principal parties were informed of the names of ministers only after the list had been drawn up. The government programme, in particular when the Ciampi government was formed, was an agenda of policy priorities derived principally from the interpretation given by the president of the republic to the country's problems. Suffice it is to point out that the Ciampi government was formed in the aftermath of the electoral referendum of 18 April 1993, when a large majority of the electorate pronounced in favour of abolishing the proportional electoral system until then in force. And it was the president of the republic who pledged

to ensure that parliament would approve the package of measures that the government was about to present (and first and foremost the new electoral law that should be approved "under the dictate" of popular will, as well as under the pressure applied by the agent of the latter, that is, the government desired by the president of the republic).

The influence acquired by the president of the republic in government formation generated severe institutional conflict on the occasion of the third government of the period subsequent to 1992: that of Berlusconi. The reason is straightforward: unlike the two previous ones, the Berlusconi government was a government of electoral not presidential derivation. It was born, in fact, from the national elections of 27-28 March 1994; that is, from the first largely bipolar contest held in the conditions of the new party system which had (if partially) risen from the ashes of the previous one overwhelmed by the electoral referendum and judicial inquiry. However, because of the nature of the alliances that formed on the occasion of the elections, the outcome was the defeat of the left rather than the victory of the right. Although the left presented itself in relatively homogeneous manner in most of the single-member constituencies (232 for the senate and 435 for the chamber) established by the new electoral law, the right took the form of two distinct alliances in the north and south of the country, with the feature in common that in both alliances the dominant party was the same (i.e., FI or Forza Italia allied, a part from minor groups, in the south with the MSI or Movimento Sociale Italiano in the *Polo del Buon Governo* and in the north with the LN or Lega Nord in the *Polo della Libertà*) [5]. Thus more appropriately it was FI which 'politically' won the elections, displaying an extraordinary ability to establish indirect links between manifestly irreconcilable political forces (MSI and LN) (on these elections, see the volumes edited by Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995 and Pasquino 1995).

Although the sum of the two distinct poles gave rise to a clearcut majority in the chamber but a much narrower if not non-existent one in the senate, the president of the republic was forced to acknowledge the success of FI by mandating its leader (on April 30) to form the new government. This mandate was anything but formal, however, given that it was issued after a month of intense consultation with the various party leaders (while the new parliament was installed on April 15). And when he issued the mandate, the president of the republic assumed the explicit function of guarantor of the formation of the new government: both because the leader of FI, and therefore the appointed president of the council, continued to wield private economic power (with a large slice of the telecommunications sector crucial to democracy) irreconcilable with the new public functions that he was to perform, and because his majority appeared to be anything but cohesive (one need only consider that Berlusconi took fully twelve days to "scioglere la riserva", that is to report the president of the republic his government might obtain the parliamentary confidence).

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5 Forza Italia, the new center-right party, was set up in the few months before the national elections of March 1994 by its leader, Mr. Silvio Berlusconi, who utilized the resources, personnel and organizations of his huge telecommunications company or Fininvest (Mccarthy 1995). The pro-fascist MSI changed in the post-fascist party of AN or Alleanza nazionale right after the March 1994 national elections. Lega Nord first appeared in two regions of the North (Veneto and Lombardia) in the Eighties, but did not get representation in the Camera dei deputati (or lower chamber of the national parliament) till the national elections of 1992 when she got 55 parliamentarians, more than doubled (117) in the following national elections of 1994.

The president of the republic's function as guarantor was manifest in both spheres of government action. Regarding government policies, on the one hand, on May 10 the president took care to make manifest his correspondence with the appointed president of the council; correspondence in which he marked out the confines (for that matter, already specified in a speech of April 26) within which the new ministers should operate (viz., "full commitment to alliances, to the policy of European unity, to the policy of peace" as regards foreign policy; "the unity of Italy and respect for republican legality" as regards internal security policy; "social solidarity" as regards welfare policy). On the other hand, concerning government appointments (on which he had already been obliged to intervene when rebutting a motion passed in the European parliament on May 4 criticising the possible presence of erstwhile fascists in the Italian government), he repeatedly invited the appointed president of the council to choose "ministers who command respect at home and abroad". These were not solely rhetorical recommendations, considering that he vetoed the appointment of a leading member of the MSI loyal to the fascist experience of the end of the war Salò Republic (who had claimed the ministry for Italians Abroad for himself) and, just before the swearing-in of the government, demanded the exchange of ministries between the FI lawyer (assigned the ministry of Justice) and a representative of the *Unione di Centro* (assigned the ministry of Defence). Given these premises, the eight months of the Berlusconi government were not surprisingly marked by constant tension with the presidency of the republic, whose "governmental" interference was nonetheless fed up by Berlusconi's reluctance to resolve his conflict of interests.

Although under the tutelage of the president of the republic, the Berlusconi government decisively broke with the practice of the two previous ones (Ciampi's in particular) by returning (more out of necessity than desire, it seems) to coalition party government practices. Thus government appointments were once again controlled by the coalition parties, which distributed them according to the bargaining criteria of the coalition policy, with the inevitable corollary of infra-coalitional conflict. Accordingly, the post of vice-president was reinstated, and then doubled so that it could be assigned to members of the two larger parties (MSI now become AN and LN, although only the AN leader saw himself invested with the power to substitute for the president of the council in his absence). FI took the largest number of ministries (eight) while the other two larger parties (AN and LN) took five each. Independent non-parliamentarian ministers were drastically thinned out (there now being only two of them, one at the Treasury ministry, the other at the newly-created ministry of Italians in the World). The number of vice-ministers (or under-secretaries) returned to the level prior to 1992, both to counterbalance the ministerial appointments (to the point that three vice-ministers, two from the FI and one from the AN, were appointed to the ministry of the Interior, which the LN wanted), and to satisfy all the coalition parties as regards their representation in the most important ministries (to the point that fully four vice-ministers, one for each of the basic parties in the coalition - FI, AN, LN and CCD or new Christian Democrats [6] - were appointed to the independent Treasury ministry). The coalition parties were authorized to create their own "government delegations" with their relative spokesmen. And finally the new gover-

6 The dissolution (before the national elections of March 1994) of the largest party of the Italian post-war republic, the DC, left on the ground several Christian Democrats micro-parties. The two more politically significant (but electorally insignificant) were, on the center-right, the CCD or Comitati Cristiani Democratici and, on the center-left, the PPI or Partito Popolare Italiano.

nment contained a numerically significant proportion (almost one-quarter of ministers) of political personnel from the previous five-party majorities.

So, although the Berlusconi government had managed to break the sequence of residual party government, it proved unable to relaunch organic party government. And this was not only due to the conditioning imposed by the president of the republic; it also and especially stemmed from the heated conflict over policies that very soon broke out internally to the government (between the LN and the other coalition partners) and which plunged it into crisis (Berlusconi tendered his resignation on 22 December 1994). It is interesting to note that, in terms of durability, the Berlusconi government (with eight months and twelve days) was even more short-lived than the average duration (12 months and 3 days) of the governments of the period 1945-1989. Of course, the contradictory electoral reform law was partly responsible for the premature crisis of that government. Yet the main reason for its failure lay in the new political context that had arisen after the crisis of 1992, and namely the fluidity of party alignments and the provisional nature of the cleavages among them. For that matter, no electoral law, even the best of them, can create institutional order where there is political disorder (Barbera 1994). One cannot save to note, however, that the new electoral law, although imperfect, was able to prevent greater fragmentation than that which would have occurred if the elections had been held using the previous system (Agosta 1994).

Thus, after the crisis of the Berlusconi government, the country returned to a residual party government presided over by Dini. In this case too, the President of the Republic played the protagonist's role in resolving the crisis, on the basis, however, of parliamentary consensus that had been previously and explicitly sought, and therefore in contrast, at least in these terms, with the circumstances surrounding the formation of the Ciampi government in May 1993. Indeed, in January 1995, the new Dini government was based on the support of an unprecedented alliance between the LN and the (centre and left) parties defeated in the elections of the previous March. An alliance, however, which did not comand the majority of the parliamentary seats, to the point that the Dini government has been made possible, formally, by the abstention of the parties which supported the Berlusconi government (infact the government got only 302 votes of the 316 parliamentary votes required). However, when the new government was formed, the parties supporting it were largely uninfluential in the distribution of government appointments (the ministers were once again selected by the president of the council jointly with the president of the republic). In fact the months that followed saw fierce conflict between certain ministers and certain parties of the new parliamentary majority (an emblematic example being the minister of Justice, whose resignation was formally requested and obtained by the Progressisti Federati parliamentary groups -that is the coalition of the leftist parties- in the senate and chamber). And, as well, the parties exerted only limited influence on the definition of the government's policies. In fact, the Dini government committed itself to the pursuit of an extremely limited range of objectives (four in all) - while also undertaking formally to resign once they had been achieved as it did finally in January 1996- objectives that reflected the common sense of national priorities rather than the programmes of specific parties. Although the president of the republic solicited, in the month following the Dini parliamentary resignation, the formation of a new "technical" government, this time the parties (especially of the center-right) halted his pressure obliging him to dissolve the parliament in February and to call for new elections in April 1996.

III. Cabinet organization and decision-making

A. *1948-1988: the acephalous republic*

At least until the beginning of the 1980s, Italian parliamentary democracy was the archetype of a "coherent model of acephalous republic" (Cavalli 1992: 237). Although art. 95.1 of the constitution solemnly states that "the President of the Council of Ministers directs the general policy of the Government and is responsible for it. He maintains the unity of political and administrative direction by promoting and coordinating the activities of the ministers", the head of the Italian executive has rarely been anything more than an equal among equals. After all, the same article of the constitution, after celebrating the role of the president of the council, immediately takes pains to point out in the next sub-paragraph that "the ministers are collectively responsible for the actions of the Council of Ministers and individually for the actions of their ministries".

This is why, given the coalitional nature of the executive, this latter came to be necessarily interpreted as the projection of the party secretariats in the coalition, which were represented internally to the executive by the various ministers (whose ministerial responsibilities were commensurate with the electoral weight of their respective parties, or of their internal factions, or again of the success of their personal preferences, Calise and Mannheimer 1982) [7]. And since the policy directions of the executive were established externally to the executive itself - that is, in the coalition parties and at their 'negotiating tables' - it followed that its directive body (the presidency of the council), devoid of any programme-making autonomy, was unable to develop its decision-making autonomy. After all, in an acephalous democracy, leaders with a transactional rather than transformational role are rewarded (Fabbrini 1991: 513). Hence, as Cotta has written (1988: 133), the prime minister, at least until the mid-1980s, exerted influence "when he assumed the role of mediator among the various actors in the governmental arena". Of course, there has been no lack of political leaders who, in particular circumstances, managed to impose their political preferences on refractory coalition partners, or on their own party. However, these leaders have been the exception rather than the rule. And the rule has been that of acephalous governments, sustained by the practice rigorously respected internally to the predominant party (the DC) in postwar governments of keeping the role of party leader and head of the government distinct.

Given these characteristics of Italian coalition government, it is not surprising that the organizational structure of the presidency of the council has been invariably weak and inefficient. In fact, a robustly organized presidency of the council would have altered the equilibria among the coalition partners entirely to the advantage of the party able to control it. As Hine writes (1988: 215): "the technical support which the Prime Minister receives is... poor. There is no Cabinet secretariat as such. The Prime Minister's office houses a number of specialised functional agencies which have found a home there for no particularly clear reason, and which have been of some marginal use to the Prime Minister in his central political role." The president of the council was able to rely on a sort of personal cabinet consisting of a handful of cronies from his political faction and which partially compensated for the absence of a genuine staff structure. Internally to this small cabinet an important role was played by the under-secretary to

7 Those ministers behaved as the delegates of their own parties, defending jealously their decision-making powers within the respective ministries.

the presidency of the council, helped organizationally by the head of the cabinet secretariat. The point, however, is this: in both cases their activity was aimed at maintaining control over relationships with parliament (and therefore with the parties in the government coalition) and not over those with other ministries and the various branches of the executive (as happens in the competitive and majoritarian democracies). In short, also the personal cabinet itself had to help the president of the council to exercise his role of mediator in the coalition, rather than bolster his role as head of the government.

B. *The reform of 1988: a head sprouts*

The situation changed in the 1980s. The electoral and political decline of the PCI, and the difficulties besetting the DC, pushed the new government coalition, the *Pentapartito*, in the direction of greater cohesion towards the outside and greater equilibrium among its internal components (the DC, on one side, and the lay parties leaded by the PSI, on the other side, Pasquino 1994). Specifically, the ascent, political more than electoral, of the PSI tended to make that party the guarantor of governmental stability (and its secretary the overall leader of the government coalition). Thus, both because of the universally decried cumbersome nature of "government by individual ministries" (that is, by the government split into lots and organized around governmental substructures endowed with decision-making autonomy and linked to their corresponding parliamentary committees), and because of the influence exerted by the powerful socialist leadership in the period 1983-1987 (which proved itself able to impose a specific agenda on the government and continuity on its action, Fabbrini 1994b), the presidency of the council underwent a series of organizational innovations which progressively strengthened its role in the government system (and with it the authority of the president of the council) (Cassese 1986). Innovations, these, which culminated in enactment of an important reform law - no. 400 of 1988 - which with a forty-year delay finally (Manzella 1991) implemented the constitutional commitment to more precise definition of the duties of the executive (article 95, in fact, states that "the law provides for the institution of the the Presidency of the Council and determines the number, attributions and organization of the ministries").

It is worth dwelling on this law (Vassallo 1995; Merlini 1991), because it enables us to gauge the changes that have taken place in the presidency of the council and in its decision-making processes. First of all, the law assigns considerable regulative powers to the government, favouring the de-legislation of many administrative matters; powers which, moreover, the government had appropriated some time previously (Calise 1994), thereby giving rise to a sort of legislative autonomy of the executive (De Siervo 1992). Indeed, the latter (but also the president of the council and his individual ministers) may promulgate rules (by decree or via a decree issued by the president of the republic - or DPR) relative to matters of public policy which have not been the subject of parliamentary legislation (indeed the parliament has gone so far as to abrogate certain legislative measures, thereby enabling the government to regulate such matters by means of specific decrees) [8]. But it is above all membership of the European Community that has enabled the government to increase its regulative powers, begin-

8 This is a possibility of which the government has taken advantage, for example in regulating the organization of the public administration, or in disciplining the employment relationships of civil servants, or in instituting the ministry of University and Scientific Research (L. 168/1989, art. 12), or in defining the criteria for implementation of the national energy plan (L. 9/1991, arts. 1 and 17).

ning with definition of the procedures for fulfilment of EC obligations, or those relative to participation in EC law-making (L. 146/1990, art. 18), or regulations for the reception of EC dispositions (L. 428/1990, art. 4).

Secondly, the law has given more rigorous definition to the organizational structure underpinning both the action of the presidency of the council and of the president of the council. As regards the former, the law provides for the institution of: a secretariat of the president of the council with the task of coordinating the council of ministers; a cabinet council [9] consisting of the most influential ministers in the executive (influential, of course, because of their role as semi-official representatives of the coalition parties) and with the task of supervising government policy directions; a number of inter-ministerial committees on matters of especial importance (fewer in number, though, than previously); a vice-president of the council with the task of establishing a balance among the main parties in the government coalition.

As regards the president of the council, he may draw on the services of several new departments [10] and he is authorized to create, by decree, *ad hoc* offices and study and work groups, as well as to reorganize those already in existence with a certain margin of discretion [11]. Again as regards the office of the president of the council, the most significant aspect is the creation of an authentic general secretariat headed by the general secretariat of the presidency of the council, which has rapidly come to assume the role of providing strategic support to the president of the council. This is because internally to the general secretariat there are those organizational structures (15 of them) which help the president of the council in his direction and coordination of the government's programme. [12] This organizational redefinition of both the presidency of the council and of the office of the president of the council has also considerably expanded the personnel employed in the various bodies supporting each of them. This expansion was fixed by the law at 432 councillors (i.e. staff with managerial and consultative roles) and 3269 officials and office-workers (organized into ten functional categories).

9 An organism which institutionalizes a body already set up by the first Craxi government of August 1983-April 1987.

10 A department for Relationships with Parliament which liaises with the legislature; a department for Regional Affairs, and a department for the Coordination of Communitarian Policies, as well as a State-Regions Conference: all of these with tasks of inter-governmental coordination. New ministerial departments have also be created, directed by ministers without portfolio or by under-secretaries with special authority, agents on behalf of the president of the council, like the department of Civil Protection, the department for Extraordinary Intervention in the *Mezzogiorno*, the department of Urban Areas and the department for Social Affairs.

11 Indeed, since 1990, the following bodies have been created: the National Commission for Equality and Equal Opportunity between Men and Women; the Commission for Access to Administrative Documents; the National Committee for Handicap Policies; the National Commission for the Environment; the Commission for the Exercise of the Right to Strike in Essential Public Services and for the Safeguarding of the Rights of Constitutionally Protected Persons; the Commission for Human Rights; the Commission for Data Protection; the Consultative Committee for the Mountain Environment; the Adriatic Authority.

12 Such as: the Committee of Experts for the Government Programme; the Department for Legal and Legislative Affairs; the Office for Administrative Coordination; the Office of the Diplomatic Councillor and that of the Military Councillor; the Press Office; the Department of the Budget and of Administrative and Technical Services; the Department for Economic Affairs.

In addition to these 3,701 persons, 144 executives and 448 officials and office-workers are employed in the government commissariats in the twenty Italian regions. [13]

C. *After 1988: which executive model?*

If these are the functional and organizational features of the new law, to what model of the executive do they relate? The new law, besides reinforcing the collective nature of the executive decision-making context with new structures [14] and powers, pursued all the three plausibile strategies (Andeweg 1993:33) of distribution of decision-making power within a cabinet system (the collegial, the oligarchical and the prime-ministerial). Infact, as regards the collegial strategy, the law has not only recognized the autonomoy of individual ministries (as guaranteed by the constitution) but has explicitly stipulated that all the principal decisions of government policy (art. 2) and all the principal decisions concerning appointment of government personnel (art. 3) should be taken by the council of ministers as a whole. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the council of ministers to approve the proposal of the president of the council to apply to the chambers for a vote of confidence (art. 2.2), just as it is the responsibility of the council of ministers to resolve conflicts of jurisdiction among ministers. Of course, this set of measures [15] is coherent with the collegial model of the executive, if we assume a collegial model as the one in which "all ministers should have an *equal* say in the decision-making process" (Andeweg 1993:26).

As regards the oligarchical strategy, and if we agree with Andeweg (1993:28) that "the indicators *par execellence* of an oligarchical cabinet system is constituted by the existence of an inner cabinet", the new law formalized the two crucial institutions of the cabinet council and the vice-presidency of the council. These were frequently used by the governments of the *Pentapartito* (and therefore by the four-party 7th Andreotti government) prior to the crisis of 1992. Thus the De Mita government (April 1988-July 1989) used the cabinet council (composed of 4 DC ministers, 1 PSI, 1 PRI, 1 PSDI and 1 PLI) and the vice-presidency (De Michelis, PSI), and so too did the 6th Andreotti government of July 1989-April 1991 (cabinet council: 5 DC ministers, 1 PSI, 1 PSDI, and 1 PLI; vice-presidency, Martelli PSI). Yet these institutions have been entirely forgotten by the "technical" governments of Amato (July 1992-May 1993), Ciampi (May 1993-May 1994) and Dini (January 1995-January 1996). But they could not have been entirely ignored by the Berlusconi government, which, as we have seen, was forced to reactivate the vice-presidency, doubling it in order to satisfy the demands of the other two main partners in the coalition (besides FI). Finally, as regards the prime-ministerial strategy, the law has equipped the president of the council with struc-

13 This figure, however, should be treated with caution: both because the staff levels established by the law have not always been reached, and indeed have been cut by the governments of the period post-1992 and because these figures do not distinguish between personnel employed in activities in support of action by the presidency of the council or of the president of the council and personnel working in the ministries without portfolio but with no functional connections with the latters.

14 The structures are organized into a hierarchy ranging from the secretary general to the departments to the service offices, with the option of creating free-standing offices independent of either a deparment or a service.

15 Which was then formalized by the *Regolamento interno del Consiglio dei ministri* enacted by Ciampi with decree by the presidency of the council of ministers on 10 November 1993.

tures and powers which have reinforced his capacity to direct the government. Furthermore, should the president of the council deem an action by an individual minister to be at variance with government policy, he may suspend him, although evaluation of the case depends on the council of ministers (art. 5). To be sure, the most salient prime-ministerial feature is the constraint imposed on individual ministers to submit their public declarations on matters concerning government policy to the president of the council for approval. The coexistence of these three different models of cabinet organization, however, should come as no surprise because, in the absence of breakdown, institutions tend to develop themselves in successive stratifications (Panebianco 1995).

In any case it has been politics which has dispelled the ambiguity of the new law in favour of one or other model of the executive.In short, first the crisis of the old party system and then the stalling of the new party system, allowed the three "technical" governments of the period July 1992-January 1996 to neglect the innovations intended to rationalize the collegial and oligarchical politics of the government coalition and to strengthen the capacity of the president of the council to direct the government. This, though, was not the case of the other government (the only one coming out from an election) of the period, which was indeed obliged to resort to a laborious process of coalition-tuning in order to maintain the unity of the coalition, nevertheless proved fruitless. With the result that the only significant organizational innovations introduced by that government were a strengthening of both the personal staff of the president of the council and the public relations staff of the presidency of the council.

IV. A 'semi-presidential' residual party government?

In the 1990s, under the powerful thrust of the crisis of the *partitocrazia*, Italian party government has progressively dwindled. After the forty-year alternation of brief phases of *organic* party government with much longer phases of *spartitorio* party government, in 1992 a phase began of practically uninterrupted *residual* party government which lasted (for now) till January 1996. Since 1992, in fact, and with the exception of the second half of 1994, government formation has been increasingly less determined by party choices and increasingly more conditioned by the strategies of the president of the republic. Decision-making processes internal to the government have displayed (also given their "technical" nature) the growing pre-eminence of the president of the council, because of the personal investiture of the latter by the president of the republic; pre-eminence which in its turn has been made possible by the recours to one of the strategies pursued by the reform of the presidency of the council with the law of 1988. In the absence of an institutional and constitutional adjustment of the government system to the new electoral arrangement introduced in 1993, the inability of the latter (made manifest especially with election of 27-28 April 1994) to produce stable majorities for the fluidity of the new party system have greatly expanded the powers of the presidency of the republic in the formation and then in the strategic choices of governments. With the paradox (which has grown more marked over time) that a 'parliamentarist' president has found himself having to act in an increasingly 'presidentialist' manner.

Of course, this expansion of powers has not been contrary to the constitution; it results, indeed, from an ambiguity in the constitution itself concerning the proper role of the president of the republic. The fact of the matter is that the president of the republic - who is elected (art. 83) indirectly by the parliament in joint session, with the presence of three delegates from each region (only 1 delegate

from Val d'Aosta) (art. 83.2), and who is "not responsible for the acts committed in the exercise of his function" (art. 90) has increasingly assumed a political role. Although the constitution (art. 92.2) assigns the president of the republic the task of nominating the president of the council of ministers "and, on his proposal, the ministers", it not assign to him that of politically guaranteeing the government. Devoid of effective institutional counter-powers (because the other guarantor institutions, beginning with the constitutional court, traditionally controlled by the parties, have been impaired by the crisis of the latter), the president of the republic has come to perform a role not dissimilar from that of the president of the French fifth republic (who, however, Sartori 1994: ch.7, is elected by the electors of that country and obliged to give account of the policy choices made in the exercise of his mandate, besides beeing kept under control by an effective *Conseil Constitutionel* because not controlled by parties).

Naturally, various factors have been at work in the diminution of the governmental role of the parties. Some of them are apparently contingent, both as regards government appointments and policies. For example, during the Berlusconi government, it was evident that the new parties that had recently moved to the forefront still did not possess professional politicians able to absolve government functions. And it was evident, as well, that a president of the council who was simultaneously the owner of almost half the country' radio and television station could not be left alone in deciding his strategies. Other factors seem less contingent, and regarding government policies in particular. In strategic areas of public policy (economic, monetary, budgetary and social policies) the government priorities and their fulfilment are increasingly imposed by the external environment (and therefore externally to the national parties themselves) via compelling signals emitted by international markets and the no less peremptory demands of EC institutions and Italy's major international partners.

In these circumstances one may legitimately ask, given that (for four years) the parties had scant influence on the distribution of government appointments and were devoid of significant influence over policies, whether the time has not come for them to leave the scene. It is difficult to answer although the outcome of the national elections of April 1996 seemed to reopen a new phase of organic party government. Anyway, for the moment, one can only point out that the Italian parliament, unable as it was to choose a clear reform path of the government system, has ended up by justifying the effective evolution (between 1992-1996) of the latter into a semi-presidential system. For roughly four years, government formation was weakly controlled by the parties and closely influenced by the president of the republic. Semipresidentialism with residual party government, precisely.

Abstract

The article deals with the evolution and transformation of Italian party government in the period 1948-1996. Considering the two crucial dimensions of "government formation" and "cabinet organization and decision-making", the article compares the period before and after 1992 (till the elections of April 1996). The comparison shows the extraordinary experience of the four years 1992-1996: universally defined as the years of the "Italian transition". If the parties controlled both the processes of government formation and cabinet decision-making in the period 1948-1992, in the following period of 1992-1996 both processes were controlled more by the president of the Republic (and by the "technical" president of Council of ministers selected by him) than by the parties (with the partial exception of the Berlusconi government of May-December 1994). The parties were so unimportant in the four years of the Italian transition, that we can define this one as a period of an unprecedented semipresidentialism with residual party government.