

## POLITICS

**Craxi could break the mould**

IT IS appropriate that, as Italy moves into the 1990s, the two most important players on the political scene are Arnaldo Forlani and Bettino Craxi.

As the newly-elected secretary of the Christian Democratic Party, Forlani symbolises all that is continuous in a political system which, for 40 years, has been in a state of stable disequilibrium.

Craxi, by contrast, has emerged as the would-be mould-breaker, and the man with a towering political ambition to put himself at the head of a Socialist-led alternative which would consign the Christian Democrats to a spell in opposition for the first time since the war.

That an era of alternating governments would be beneficial for Italy is now beyond serious argument. The DC has ruled in varying combinations with the four other parties which comprise the current coalition since 1948 - all fortified by a shared determination to exclude from office the largest Communist Party (Pci) in the western world, and secured by the creation of an extensive and frequently corrupt system of clientelism, which would be an embarrassment to any other European country but Italy.

While firmly resisting any temptation to award the Communists an electoral majority, the Italian voter has found himself powerless to sanction the governing parties for their improprieties and for their performance, or lack of it, in office. Since the governing stables are never properly cleaned, the result has been a relentless and too-frequently deleterious control by the governing parties over most key aspects of economic and social life.

Elections in Italy, therefore, have served not to determine a choice between competing policies and politicians, but to regulate the rivalry between the coalition parties, principally the DC and the Socialists, for government positions and for the political spoils to be plucked from the *sottogoverno* network of public corporations and entities.

Social and economic changes in the 1980s may now be weakening the conditions that have hitherto sustained this very durable formula. Above all, it is the twin poles of the Italian political system, the DC and the Pci, which are feeling the

The DC itself has always been more of a coalition of regional parties and interests than a coherent political entity, glued together by the possession of power and extraordinarily successful in resolving, through its own internal bargains, wider conflicts in society at large.

More clearly than ever before, however, there is now a fundamental clash between the inescapable requirements of political economy and the DC's system of political power. Reduction of the public deficit and coping with the burden of debt-servicing is beginning to impair the availability of funds and benefits (including extremely casual tax collection from the self-employed) to some of the DC's traditional supporters.

The present agonies and unpopularity over public finance of the government led by Mr Ciriaco De Mita, who until February had been leader of the DC for six years, is a clear taste of the difficulties ahead. It is an open question whether the party at large will stick behind his "austerity" policy for restoring public finances, and equally open as

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to whether the DC is capable of organising support for any such policy. Certainly there is nothing in Mr Forlani's background to suggest that he will have sufficient grip on the DC's untidy factions to sustain a rough weather government.

It is here that the European Parliament elections in June assume such importance. The 1980s have already revealed some softening in the DC vote. If it fails to hold up in June, Mr De Mita will probably be discarded, and the DC will turn to another senior figure, quite likely Mr Giulio Andreotti, the Foreign Minister, to take over the premiership.

But the real point at issue is whether the DC is capable of providing any leader with resolution to confront party interests in the cause of sound government. Without doubt, there is a stronger popular demand than ever before for efficient public services and economic policies that will not increase the risks to national prosperity

posed by debt and deficits.

This has much to do with the country's steady integration into the international economy, particularly the European, and the consequent fact that quality of government has become an important competitive factor in the international economy.

Mr Craxi has understood this, which is partly why he has his own man, Mr Giuliano Amato, at the Treasury, being seen to struggle against the considerable indifference of most DC ministers (and some of his own Socialist colleagues) in favour of a medium-term plan for restoring public finances. He is also counting on memories of his own, highly successful four-year premiership delivering an electoral bonus in June, to add to the 15.3 per cent the Socialists took in the 1987 general election.

His term as prime minister between 1983 and 1987 did much to change the image of the office, and to focus political attention on what government did, rather than how its component parties presented themselves. He was fortunate that the process had already been launched for him from the middle of 1981 when the Republican, Giovanni Spadolini, became the first non-Christian Democrat prime minister since the end of the war.

Craxi took over with no previous experience of government, but with a strategy determined to exploit the office to the benefit of his Socialist Party. His aim was to establish its independence of both the Communists and the DC, and to project it as the potential leader of a "third force" which gave a priority to coherent government and was not in thrall to either major party.

By the time he left the Chigi in March 1987, Craxi had been the first post-war Italian politician to create a national reputation as a man of government, rather than a leader of a political force. He did so with a style of leadership radically different from the DC's endless search for compromise and consensus, preferring to fix clear objectives such as the controversial reform of the *scala mobile* system of wage indexation, and then pursuing them with determination.

At the end of the 1980s, Craxi is an obsessive figure for both the DC and the Communists, who have now developed quite different strategies for dealing

to contain him. Forlani's DC is now according him respectful "autonomy", recognising that securing his co-operation means policy concessions, and that he will never cease trying to expose the manifest contradictions in the DC approach to government.

The Communists believe that they can expose Craxi as fraud, incapable of being a reformer inside a coalition with the DC, but frightened to achieve the "unity of the left" by joining the Pci in proposing an alternative to the DC.

This is undoubtedly Craxi's aim for the 1990s. His opportunity comes from: the steady decline in Communist support from 30.4 per cent in 1979 to 26.6 per cent in 1987, itself a product of extremely muddled leadership; Craxi's successes in government (he claims that the Socialists have now taken 19 votes off the Pci); and the fragmentation, under the impact of industrial and technological change, of the party's working-class base.

But Craxi regards any alliance with the current Pci as unfeasible. First, the Italian left cannot yet command a majority, not even in a somewhat improbable combination with the Social Democrats, Republicans and Radicals. But more important, he will insist on leading the left alternative to the DC, though he knows he will have no claim to do so unless the Socialist vote can approximate that of the Communists or, at best, exceed it.

Even then, he may have hesitations. The Pci, under its new leader, Achille Occhetto is speeding down the social democratic path, but the party's name remains a problem for Craxi as well as the Marxist inclinations of some of its leaders. Craxi calls himself a socialist, but is no ideologue and in many countries might be regarded as a liberal reformer.

In the meantime, he knows that there is no real alternative to the five-party coalition which will probably still be DC-led until the next elections which are not due until 1992 but could easily take place next year or the year after. No until this poll is out of the way can any confident predictions be made about the possibilities of fundamental political change in the 1990s.