

Newsweek & "Veltrusconi"

di Maria Rita Latta (April 01, 2008)



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elections. There is a rather frightening photomontage representing a character called "Veltrusconi." His face is formed by two halves of the two main frontrunners in the election and includes this caption: "How a grand coalition could end Italy's chaos." Inside, the summary of the main article expresses clearly the magazine's take on the result of the elections: "If Silvio Berlusconi and Walter Veltroni came together they just might be able to save Italy." There are also two interviews with the candidates. According to Newsweek, the greatest fear of each candidate may well be that "he'll win—only to preside over yet another Italian government crippled by fractious political parties and shaky coalitions in the two houses of Parliament. Such a regime cannot even begin to save Italy from a mountain of economic and political woes."

Newsweek notices that for the first time in modern Italian history, the election, to be held on April 13 and 14 "presents the semblance of a real two-party contest" and if the candidates are "serious about solving Italy's problems, they'll leave the door wide open to the possibility of a 'grand coalition' once the votes are counted—even if neither is quite ready to say yes to that proposal in public."

Then, there are the profiles of both politicians. We are reminded of Silvio Berlusconi's past as a former singer on cruise ships and the fact that he became a billionaire by building an empire of privately-owned television stations and that without question he is "Italy's most entertaining politician." And now at 71, "he looks much younger, thanks to his undeniable personal energy and a few equally undeniable cosmetic touches, including the color and quantity of his hair."

Walter Veltroni is portrayed as no neophyte, whose career in politics goes back 30 years, "beginning as a young activist in the Italian Communist Party and developing into a full-blown apparatchik." After the collapse of the Soviet Union discredited the message, Veltroni "saw centrism as the key to his political future." In particular Newsweek's portrait includes borrowing, quite blatantly, his slogan "Si può fare" from Barack Obama's "Yes we can."

It appears clear to the reader that the personalities of the two candidates don't mix well and the magazine is asking, at this point, what it would take to turn the "Yes we can" into "Silvio and I can." With a "grand coalition" both parties would come together mainly for electoral reform and then, in relatively short order, everyone would be back at the polls. Though, for the magazine, it would be better if the coalition continued governing. In fact, in Italy there is a lot of work to be done and for the most part it is "painful." "A weak government" — continues Newsweek — "can't make it work, and the country's two leading politicians could conclude they're better off taking joint responsibility rather than shouldering the blame for the pain alone. Perhaps most crucial are welfare and labor reforms."

In his interview, Walter Veltroni reminds us that when Prodi's government fell, he proposed to form a government together with Berlusconi in order to make institutional reforms and to pass electoral reforms. "The right," continues Veltroni, "specifically Berlusconi, opposed it. They carry the responsibility. If you are asking me if I would consider it again, I would say probably."

Such a statement stirred so many reactions to the possibility of an "inciucio" (alliance) with Silvio Berlusconi, viewed negatively by the smaller parties, that Veltroni had to explain the meaning of his statement: "There is no possibility after the vote for a 'grand coalition' government, though it is possible to be together in order to pass institutional reforms." So, in Veltroni's mind the "grand coalition" is to be used only in the extreme case of making important changes to the Constitution, which should be done with the consent of all the political parties.

In his interview Silvio Berlusconi talks about the difficult economic situation in Italy, as well as in Europe and the U.S. With respect to his competitor, Berlusconi is rather direct: "He's a great talker, but the performance he's staging is over. Italians have realized that in Italy there are two lefts—that the left means 67 more taxes, increased taxes, open borders with a drop in security, the tragedy of garbage in Italy and the stopping of public works. These are the facts of the left. Then there are nice words and promises, and that's the left of Veltroni." There is not a word from Berlusconi on the "grand coalition" even though after the echoes of Veltroni's interview he stated: "No 'grand coalition.' Who has more votes has the duty to govern."

The results of the elections will soon show if Italy's mad decline will continue—and that would be



something to fear indeed, much more than the "Veltrusconi" monster appearing on the cover of Newsweek.

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