

Ups and Downs of Moving Onto the Playing Field

Judith Harris (December 28, 2012)



Mario Monti announces his formal entry into politics after 13 months of technical leader of Italy. The outgoing Premier has won the support of the Vatican. However, the polls continue to tell the story. They suggest that Monti has obtained the 20% of the potential electorate for the national general elections slated to take place in late February. Polls also show Silvio Berlusconi (on the right with his troubled Freedom Party (PdL)) at about the same amount while Pier Luigi Bersani (on the left with Partito Democratico) is expected to have at least 35% of vote.

The outgoing Premier [Mario Monti](#) [2], in announcing his formal entry into politics after 13 months as a technical or non-political leader, made the point that he is going "up" onto the playing field. This was a dig at his predecessor [Silvio Berlusconi](#) [3], who has made it his custom to speak, again and again, of going "down" onto the playing field or, in Italian, scendere in campo. And in a very real sense this is the choice facing Italy at the dawn of a new year: to move upward into a new form and practice of politics or to sink further down into the same old swamp.

What swamp? Corruption plays a part, and in our little village north of Rome a candidate for regional office has already mounted posters promising an end to the corruption embodied, and heftily, in the regional official known as "Batman," who was today released from three months in prison. But corruption is hardly the whole, in a new year that threatens to offer an even tougher uphill slog than



did 2012. It has already been announced that train tickets, auto insurance rates and autostrada tariffs will surge, and even traffic fines will rise by 6%. These and other soaring costs over which citizens have no control, including household utilities and taxes for local services like garbage collection, are estimated to cost over the year each and every family E1,500 (\$1,977). For many families this is the rough equivalent of an entire month's salary.

In the South, some 330,000 jobs in Southern Italy have already been lost during the course of the past year, and 16,000 businesses went under. Throughout the nation industrial unrest is a certainty even as turnover and orders fell over the year by 4.7%, according to [ISTAT](#) [4], the national statistics-gathering agency, on Dec. 19. Significantly, food sales - which economists traditionally considered inelastic - slumped by 1.3% in just one month (the latest statistic, for October), bringing the total drop in retail and food purchases in the course of a year to 2.8%.

An uphill climb onto the Italian political field will therefore not be easy, but Monti has won the support of the Vatican, for one, with the Osservatore Romano lauding his formal entry into the political race as "noble." In a signed editorial in *Avvenire*, the official daily of the Italian bishops, [Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco of Genoa](#) [5], who presides over the bishops' conference, observed that, "There is widespread recognition of Monti's honesty and capability... Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but we truly desire that policy makers chosen in the forthcoming elections will be those reflecting politics of the highest level--those who seek the good of the nation."

An infuriated editor of the a pro-Berlusconi daily accused the Church of having been bought by Monti, whose government failed to impose the stringent real estate taxes upon Catholic properties which some had desired.

But the polls continue to tell the story. They suggest that Monti commands the support of one out of every five voters, or 20% of the potential electorate for the national general elections slated to take place in late February. Polls show Berlusconi at about the same amount, but the sense is that Monti already has sufficient backing to challenge the couple the political analysts have taken to calling, in jest, "B & B" - that is, Berlusconi on the right with his troubled [Freedom Party \(Pdl\)](#) [6] and [Pier Luigi Bersani](#) [7] on the left with his still powerful (he can expect at least 35% of the vote) [Partito Democratico \(PD\)](#) [8]. For both B & B, defections are already a problem. Along with his meetings with potential allies in the Catholic world and with sympathetic industrialists, Monti has spent most of this holiday week with politicians from other parties who are jumping onto the Monti bandwagon.

For the PD the most devastating defection is that of [Pietro Ichino](#). [9] a bland-looking but skilled PD leader who reportedly drafted much of his old friend Monti's program (already known as the "Monti agenda"), presented just before Christmas. Ichino explains that Monti's staff merely drew upon Ichino's Internet musings on the economy, but the busy bloggers of *Dagospia* say that Ichino was the primary author of Monti's program proposals. PD leaders were particularly irritated because Ichino was campaigning for the PD at the same time that he was, presumably in secret, drafting Monti's agenda, which challenges the PD itself. Ichino moreover is himself the head of a faction of bright young things within the PD who will meet with Monti in Orvieto on Jan. 12. Reportedly Ichino will also organize Monti's election campaign in the wealthy northern region of Lombardy, where the vote for a new regional assembly will take place contemporaneously with that for the national general elections.



In interviews Ichino has ventured challenging opinions, such as that the program of Florence's young mayor [Matteo Renzi](#) [10] was on the lines of Monti's. This was a clear nod to Renzi's followers to shift alliances from Bersani. Elsewhere Ichino has said, pointedly, "If we consider the Monti operation with the eyes of young people, of women, of the over-55s who are already excluded from the labor market and of all the other outsiders, I would dare to say that the Monti agenda is closer to the weak and the least than is the program of the Partito Democratico."

But not everyone in the centrist camp agrees that Monti can successfully climb the political hill upward. "We all had high hopes for Monti," one Milanese voter told me. "But the result is that whoever paid taxes before simply pays more taxes now [because] we are identifiable. Most who had more than their fair share still do. But the evaders still seem to be evading. And in a recession when spending should be encouraged, Italian savings are being scooped up and transferred to unproductive uses."

Agreed. But if not Monti, who?

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