

ITALY'S MARCH ELECTION SAW TWO POPULIST parties swept into power and the political center falling out of favor. Just prior to that vote, Luciano Fontana, Editor in Chief of the *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's oldest newspapers, outlined the ongoing collapse of the nation's democratic ideals in his book *Un paese senza leader* (*A Country Without Leaders*).

Reforms in the wake of corruption scandals in the 1990s created the so-called "Second Republic," which aimed for a European-style of representation and majority rule. Under this system, Mr. Fontana notes, governments should last the duration of a legislature – five years. Instead, leadership has become a revolving door spinning faster and faster, often arriving and departing in the space of months.

"The mythology of the Second Republic has completely failed in these 25 years," says Mr. Fontana. "Fragile parties are in continuous transformation; leaders have emerged only to founder quickly – as many as 10 have come and gone on the center left in this period. Election laws have not worked."

The March vote reflected the frustration, Mr. Fontana says. "We saw a very great desire to return to the old system of proportional representation and the clear rise of new forces – 'nationalists' or 'populists.'"

The new government saw an early test of its policies when its first budget, with expanded debt to pay in part for entitlement programs, was rejected by the EU, setting off an international political stalemate.

In our interview with Mr. Fontana, who has been with the *Corriere della Sera* since 1997 and Editor in Chief since 2015, he is clear-eyed but insists he has not lost hope, despite the chaos.

"I firmly believe in the robustness of the Italian economy and the quality of the entrepreneurial fabric of the country," he says. "Every day, we hear positive stories of leadership in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and in the most innovative sectors – in spite of a crisis of political leadership that has been dragging on for years. The entire political class must accept responsibility, and establish a clear call for respect of institutional roles and the principles of democracy."

Is Italy's political chaos part of a global crisis?

Some features are similar to what is happening in many countries of the world – with the US, with Brexit, with movements in Central and Northern Europe, and with the rise of Marine Le Pen's party. The common denominators are globalization and immigration. Matteo Salvini, the current Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister, says the idea of a nationalism and identity party came to him from

watching other nations in the European Parliament. Territory versus globalization and identity versus openness – these became the key words of his new politics, radically transforming his party.

Peculiar to Italy, we have a crisis in politics and a ruling class that has been ineffective over 25 years. The fragile governments that have succeeded each other are the clearest proof. That lack of leadership left us vulnerable to the social pressures of migratory waves, which exacerbated the problem.

We are also an exception because we have two significant populist and nationalist parties – the League and the Five Star Movement. Usually, there is only one – and perhaps not as significant, as in Germany.

THE COURAGE OF Responsibility

In your book, you talk about the "courage of responsibility." What does that mean?

The "courage of responsibility" is a rejection of the kind of politics that is perpetually in electoral campaign mode. Social media amplifies that: simple words, direct and often vulgar, instant promises as if the solutions were always so easy. Then the next promise and the next battle and the next campaign without ever verifying the factual basis. Facts, compatibility, the relationship between promises and results, all that disappears, along with the noble art of finding the best compromise to achieve a result.

So the "courage of responsibility" means speaking the truth, and not just capturing the consensus; knowing how to say the right things, even hard things. Knowing what is possible, when an exceptional effort must really be demanded of the country. Having an enormous public debt, for instance – you can rage against Europe's demands for our budget, but that debt is not only a problem for Europe, it is a problem for ourselves, for our economy.

If the budget proposed to Europe had been made up more of tax reductions to spur innovation and growth – improving productivity and technological modernization – probably our overspending would be seen as an effort to improve the country. Instead, more welfare, aimed more at the next electoral cam-

Author and Editor in Chief of the venerable *Corriere della Sera* **LUCIANO FONTANA** tells Brunswick's **ALESSANDRO IOZZIA** and **CESARE CALABRESE** how Italy can escape the chaos of its political "perfect storm."



paign than governing the country, was the opposite of the courage of responsibility.

Do you see Italy having a direct impact on the European elections next May?

Certainly. Salvini is becoming the leading European figure of the parties that pursue nationalism. Both Salvini and Luigi Di Maio [leader of the Five-Star Movement] will use the budget dispute with Europe in their campaigns. None of the current discussions are aimed at finding a solution, but only at constructing a narrative to identify the “perfect enemy” – in this case, the European technocrats.

We saw this with the Morandi Bridge collapse in Genoa in August [where 43 people died]. Società Autostrade (the concession holder of the stretch of road involved in the incident) was held up as the “perfect monster.” No one will reconstruct the bridge any time soon, but that’s been completely overlooked. The important thing has been to use the tragedy as a banner that can be waved in the electoral campaign.

To be fair, the European Commission is conducting an electoral campaign in the contrary direction, showing that if a country chooses populist and nationalist parties, its citizens will face serious consequences. I see an excess of zeal. Both Europe and Italy desperately need dialogue and compromise. It is not in anyone’s interest for the situation to escalate.

Do you see a way out of Italy’s political morass?

The two majority parties, both of which are populist and nationalist, will sooner or later be reabsorbed. Arguments are being aired in favor of an open,

Luciano Fontana, Editor in Chief of Italy’s Corriere della Sera, shakes hands with a shirt-sleeved Matteo Salvini, leader of the populist political party the League, at the newspaper’s offices in Milan. Mr. Salvini had donated blood earlier that morning, accompanied by a photographer, and stopped by the Corriere della Sera offices afterward. The League came to power in Italy in March of last year. Mr. Salvini is the current Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister.

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global, liberal world, attentive to expertise. There is a need for simple and clear language, a plausible program and a story that is not entirely backward looking. A leader is required who knows how to forge the future and is the incarnation of the idea of expertise and education – and that leader cannot be either Berlusconi or the old Democratic Party.

Someone new must emerge?

Yes. In this climate, a capable leader with a well-defined program and a winning idea can emerge quickly. Salvini was a Municipal Councillor in Milan four years ago; the Five Star party’s first test was in the regional elections in 2012. A leader must have a notion of country he can articulate in a very clear, well-defined and simple way – because that’s how politics are conducted now – and have managers around him with the right expertise. Not one man alone, but someone who knows how to mobilize others.

You talk a lot about of memory. Are Italians and Europeans forgetting where they come from?

Our memory will gradually return. Italy saw joining the euro as a national mission. We were proud to have been an early supporter. We understood the advantage of being part of a market of what was then 500 million people. We appreciated the opening of the borders, the single currency, the option for students to go anywhere, the freedom of movement of people and goods. These things are an enormous advantage for a country like ours, which does not have raw materials and that thrives on its openness.

What is the role of journalism now?

Quality journalism is a safety net. It helps us understand and digest the issues of the day. Our job at the Corriere della Sera is not to excite or to be branded by our prejudices, but to be informed and open to the world. Like major international newspapers like The New York Times, we’ve established a paywall. This was a watershed year: both the political uncertainty and the debate about fake news helped convince people to pay something to have quality information. We have gained more than 100,000 digital subscriptions this year, better than expected. We have begun to hire new journalists. For the first time in many years, we are able to look to the future rather than wondering how to survive.

Politicians’ attacks have been a good thing?

Where there is confusion, more information is sold, because those who feel lost need a compass. When things are normal, newspapers do badly. ♦