

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6792>



Italy

Why Salvini could become Prime Minister of Italy

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV547 - August 2020 -

Publication date: Sunday 30 August 2020

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Dave Kellaway reviews David Broder's, *First they took Rome: How the Populist Right Conquered Italy*, Verso Books 2020.

"There's no left anymore" - Nicola, retired lorry driver; "there is just a deep sorrow and hurt among many, many people who see themselves as left" - Franca, teacher; "they are all the same the only one who can sort it out is Salvini"- Giuseppe, driver who worked in Germany for several years."; "The Democratic Party (PD) is actually the preferred party of the rational sectors of the bourgeoisie" - Antonello, comrade from Naples.

These are all comments I have heard in the last month or so in Italy. David Broder's book helps us understand why such statements are made in a country where the working class movement won a tremendous number of material reforms following the mass actions of the Italian Hot Autumn in 69, where a reformist communist party several million strong dominated culture and civil society for decades.

Even the hopes of Rifondazione, the party formed by dissident communist party members and the radical left when the PCI formally renounced anti-capitalism in 1991, came to nothing in less than ten years - despite winning over 8% of the votes in elections and having 100,000 plus members.

Salvini's successful reorientation of the Lega

Today Salvini's Lega is the biggest party at around 30% in the polls and with the current unity of the right wing coalition has an evens chance of winning the next general election. [\[1\]](#) Yet in 2013 the Lega Nord as it was then called at the time only got 4.3%, with its historic leader Bossi mired in corruption while the new centrist populists on the block, the Five Star Movement (M5S), were beginning to make serious headway. [\[2\]](#)

Under Salvini's leadership, the Lega Nord has been transformed from a party wanting independence for a region into one aspiring to national government. He has achieved this without splits and has even rebranded the party as the **Lega for Salvini Premier**. Despite some rumblings, he has total control and has largely eaten up the right wing base of Berlusconi's Forza Italia party and even won some former M5S MPs and supporters.

There are numerous quotes of Salvini abusing people living in the South; e.g. saying even the dogs run away because they smell, using the abusive term, *terroni* (of the earth, often used to mean of darker complexion in a racist manner), and wishing that Vesuvius or Etna would explode and sweep them all away. But today he is campaigning throughout the south, essentially taking over Berlusconi's base replete with mafia complicit cadre.

At a campaign rally just the other day in the town I am staying in his campaign posters stated: "Campanian people first" (*Primi i campani*). Obviously a key reason for being able to manage such a 360 degree turn is his use of continual dog whistle racism against migrants. He links their presence to increased crime and these days to Covid infections too.

While Salvini has undoubtedly managed his party well and fed astutely off the confusion and disarray of Italian politics there are a number of contingent and objective factors that explains his rise, as Broder explains coherently in his book.

Six factors that made it all possible

– Much British commentary on Italy revels in its supposed volatility looking at the number of governments it has had since 1945 but this fails to see that up to the 1980s:

there was a bipolar stability of a broad tent Christian Democracy and a moderate left PCI and the economy and living standards had developed... to the extent that Italy overtook the UK on certain economic indicators.

(chap.1)

It was becoming increasingly difficult for the centre right parties to use the bogeyman of the communist threat and this made it easier for the corrupt running of the political parties to be exposed - leading to Tangentopoli (Bribesville) where state prosecutors played a big role. Christian Democracy and the Socialist Party collapsed and this led the way to first of a new breed of populist political leaders, with Berlusconi. Broder shows how Salvini fits into this new form of politics. After Berlusconi we had the technocrat Monti and then the PD leader Renzi who all claimed to be national leaders saving Italy from economic chaos.

– Broder situates the rise of Lega into this new political set up:

it corresponded to a changing approach to public life, less defined by unifying cultural visions or even collective material demands as by a **transactional relationship between the atomized citizen and the state**. This shift has a particular class basis - enabled the Lega to broaden support from small businessmen and their employees to wider demographics in those areas where it is strong.

– All this is connected to the **defeats of the workers movement**, particularly its bastions in the car industry like Fiat or Pirelli. The shop floor delegate structures melted away, the union bureaucracy took back control and worked closely with the rightward moving PD. Living standards consequently fell and those who have lost out turn their anger onto migrants.

The so-called centre left has not been able to defend migrants consistently or counter the racism of the Lega. It voices some moral condemnation but essentially accepts the notion of too many migrants. It was a PD minister, Minniti that passed a law leading to the notorious detention camps in Libya. The Catholic Church has mobilised more support than the official left.

A bit like Miliband's migrant mugs, the PD line has not even worked electorally. [3] At the well-attended militant protest in my town the PD mayor had called on us to be civic and polite to Salvini when he came. Their campaign offices were high on the square where he spoke - they could not even put out an anti-racist banner but some stood and watched the vigorous protest.

– A big factor in the Lega's resilience is the way it was **always organised as a serious political party with local structures and cadres** (even if this has weakened somewhat). A rather artificial development of a 'Padanian' cultural identity was also cultivated. (3) Forza Italia was organised as a Berlusconi topdown enterprise and the M5S

movement also eschews local or party structures for online organisation. Salvini's turn to a national Lega means it has developed more robust structures than its rivals through recruiting local Forza Italia cadres and taking over the mafia links.

– There are some **contingent reasons for Salvini's rise. He was in the right place at the right time when Berlusconi was finally** charged with fraud and when Bossi, the historic founder, was found with his hand in the till.

– I would add another factor. The fact that Salvini is not a lawyer, teacher or academic. Even though he is far from being a salt of the earth proletarian **he consciously does not use the historical language of the Italian politician.** Just as with the British Labour Party most of the centre left politicians are professionals, lawyers or academics or at least speak like them. In my opinion a big error of people opposing Salvini is to focus on his lack of education or the fact that he does not respect the dignity of Italian politics. In British terms it is a bit like middle class sneering at Nigel Farage's lack of culture.

"Captain Salvini" as interior minister

The 2018 general elections saw the Lega and M5S as the two biggest parties. The latter had won a large number of PD voters disillusioned with the Renzi government, particularly in the South. Although there were clear political differences, their common euroscepticism and populist rhetoric about the political caste/corrupt Rome swamp meant there was a basis for a government contract. Salvini made sure he became Interior minister which allowed him to be on the media all the time, 'defending Italians from the threat of the migrant invasion'. He would dress up in a different police uniform every day and eagerly took on the 'capitano' (captain) nickname.

Nevertheless the limits of Salvini's political nous was shown by his grandstanding play in August 2019 of resigning to force a new general election which polls suggested he might win. Both Conte, the 'independent' prime minister imposed by the M5S and Matheralla, the PD President, manoeuvred adroitly to set up a new PD/M5S coalition.

M5S in crisis

The M5S is in total crisis as the leadership and MPs split between those who want to retain their original anti-institutional/movementist ideology and the majority who prefer to become a party like the others. According to reports in Corriere della Sera (26 August 2020) Di Battista and Casaleggio who lead the fundamentalist wing, think they can take 30 - 50 MPs and senators. Broder captures well the intrinsic contradiction of the M5S:

M5S is anti-establishment but not anti-systemic. Its opposition to the establishment is limited to the terrain of representation, forms of politics rather than the wider organisation of society.

(Chapter 4)

The PD is hopeful of absorbing a big part of the M5S into a new organic coalition even leading to some sort of new movement or party. Given the vacuity of PD politics that is not so far-fetched.

Since the book was published....

In the big vote for 7 regional governments and over a 1000 local councils on September 20/21 the government parties are disunited with a joint slate only in one region. At the same time the right are pretty solid with the post-fascist Fratelli di Italia (Brothers of Italy), led by Meloni, and Berlusconi's Forza Italia in a common slate along with a number of smaller right of centre groups. Salvini is hoping a big vote for the right might spark a political crisis leading to a general election.

However the government parties and Conte are determined to serve out the legislature. This position is bolstered by the fact that if the referendum at the same time as the local elections agrees to a reduction of about a third of the MPs and senators many of them will lose their posts, an early election reduces their pension rights!

There are other worries for Salvini. Conte has seen his approval ratings soar during the Covid crisis. Despite a catastrophic start a strict lockdown, much harder than in Britain, meant the pandemic was restricted mostly to the north - indeed in places mainly governed by the Lega. His demolition of Salvini when he attempted to force an early election last year was widely applauded.

Conte might weigh up the possibilities of setting up his own electoral front, which may also not be welcomed by the PD. Meloni, whose political career has crossed all the neo-fascist organisations, sees her party is on 18% in the polls and her personal ratings are close to those of Salvini. The latter's cavalier attitude to the Covid pandemic may cost him some support and he is certainly looking over his shoulder at Meloni. The rise of the neo-fascists reflects a radicalisation to the right in Italian politics. It was noticeable at a recent anti-Salvini protest I attended that the stewarding protecting him was in the hands of hard line fascists.

The coming unemployment catastrophe could provide fertile recruiting ground for Salvini if there is no organised resistance in the workplaces or communities. Certainly the current government cannot be judged as progressive just because the Lega has been excluded. Its debates focus on which sectors of capital should get the Covid EU money rather than a determined defence of jobs or living standards. Broder correctly points out in his conclusion that moral crusades and general anti-fascist posturing will not defeat Salvini. You have to develop a programme that can win over working people on the fundamental material issues facing them. Nobody is saying that democratic and progressive movements like the Sardines, which helped save Emilia Romagna region from a Lega victory, do not make a helpful contribution but a class based active opposition is still necessary that can impose a new relationship of forces.

David Broder's book is a very useful primer and introduction to Italian politics, particularly since the 1980s. It digs behind the colourful demagoguery of "captain" Salvini to show the subjective and objective forces that have propelled him this far. As he also notes, some similar trends are visible in British politics.

28 August 2020

Cava dei Tirreni, Italy.

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[1] The Lega Nord was founded in 1991 as a federation of a number of existing regional parties in the north and centre of Italy. Salvini defeated its first leader Bossi in an internal election in 2013.

[2] The Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) was founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo. It has posed itself as sitting outside the traditional left-right divide in a typically populist manner.

[3] Under the leadership of Ed Miliband in 2015 the British Labour Party produced mugs with the slogan "Controls on immigration - I'm voting Labour", a move widely deplored by the Labour left.