

SALVINI ASCENDANT

ITALY HAS A new strongman—for many, a new saviour. The effective head of the government in Rome is not the titular Premier, Giuseppe Conte, nor the winner of the last election, Five Stars leader Luigi Di Maio. It is the Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. As if overnight, a hitherto obscure municipal councillor from Milan, long-time militant in the separatist Northern League, has become the most powerful figure in the country. In just five years, a party that was a dilapidated political relic, with 3–4 per cent support in the polls, has become, in his hands, the pivot of Italian—and perhaps European—politics. There is a sense, however, in which the story of this astonishing transformation begins a long way off, not in time but space—in the wars and vast economic disparities that have driven millions of Africans and Asians across the Mediterranean in search of work, freedom and a little well-being, towards an affluent Europe that is ever more ageing, unequal and rancorous.

An otherwise normal February day in 2016 in a holding camp on the Greek-Macedonian border, in the middle of that year's migrant emergency, offers a sense of this landscape. The hamlet of Idomeni lies among low hills, the jagged Balkans in the distance. Here, the double barbed wire of the government in Skopje attracts less attention than Orbán's rolls of the same in Hungary, though—matter for guilt for some, merit for others—landing a single country with the consequences of a modern exodus. It is nearly supper-time, and seen from a distance the Greek camp, which holds about ten thousand refugees, is quiet, as if swallowed up in the darkness. But as you get closer, there is a souk and some children dancing to Syrian music. A precinct of despair has become a small village, with vans selling sandwiches outside and taxis hoping to pick up anyone wanting to turn back. In the gathering shadows of the evening, the refugees light fires against the cold, and smoke from the burning

wood and plastic thickens the air. The chemical toilets are overflowing; there are queues for showers, clothes hung out on the fencing to dry. A few days ago these families were facing the high seas; their red life-jackets are still in use, as little mattresses for sleeping on. Idomeni is a depository of the rejected: Pakistanis, Iraqis, Ghanaians, Afghanis with no chance of continuing their journey to the countries of their dreams—Austria, Germany, Switzerland. They are not video emblems or avatars in a social network: they have eyes, arms, legs, mouths for eating, teeth for smiling. They are peaceable, curious—if at times a little uncomfortable with reporters: no-one wants to be pitied.

How can anyone not feel shame at the inequalities on display here? Capital moves unimpeded; walls go up against human beings. Life depends on a document and a stamp, fate on a miserable piece of paper; hours are spent queuing for a sandwich, waiting fruitlessly for decisions taken by who knows whom, or why. You have to remind yourself of the obvious to prevent your heart from hardening: there are no deserts in our origins, none of us chooses where we are born, or to whom. The Balkan countries on the route north have already decided to limit the numbers crossing their frontiers. Europe prefers to look the other way—or to exploit the political imaginary that can come from the desperation of others: not to help, but to identify an enemy, to stage a competition in humiliation. Who qualifies as the most disadvantaged in the world? The last of the earth and the next-to-last are pitted against each other, while the most favoured are left secure. Yachts pass half-empty while others squabble over a place on the raft.

In Italy, Salvini has led a revolt on the rafts by the next-to-last. Scarcely aware any longer of who might be above them, they see those below them clutching at the shores of Europe as a threat, for they fear sliding further down themselves. The only social mobility possible in a weary, ageing continent seems to be reversal: children of workers no longer becoming doctors, but simply jobless. With great artistry, the leader of the next-to-last has learnt how to talk to their stomachs—their hearts, too.

Beginnings

The Northern League was founded in 1991, on the eve of the implosion of the three mass parties—the Christian Democrats, Communists and Socialists—that had dominated Italy since the Second World War.

It was a merger of Umberto Bossi's Lombard League, which dated back to the mid-eighties, with other regionalist forces in the affluent north, casting itself as neither right nor left. Its first electoral successes marked a signal change in Italian politics. This was no longer a party posing universal demands. Its goal was particularist: the independence of the North, conceived as a nation around the River Po, an imaginary Padania that had never existed. Its message: the North, a society that worked and produced, was sick of paying taxes for small-time politicians in the South to distribute to their clients as bureaucratic sinecures or unemployment benefits. Once independence was achieved, no more money would leach away to 'thieving Rome'. In the dramatic disequilibrium between Italy's prosperous, modern North and its backward, dependent South lay the tinder of the League's appeal. It made no promise to correct the imbalance. The North should simply abandon the South to its fate, and look after its own interests.

With the collapse of the Christian Democrats and Socialists in the Tangentopoli scandals, and the division and de-communization of the PCI after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the League made its breakthrough in 1994, when it got 8.4 per cent of the national vote—overwhelmingly concentrated in the North, enjoying over double that support in Lombardy—in a three-way alliance with Berlusconi and the formerly fascist National Alliance, whose bastions lay in the South. With this victory came participation in a centre-right government led by Berlusconi. It did not last long. Bossi, a rough-hewn, truculent maverick, chafed at his subordinate role in the coalition. Unable to advance his party's demands within it, and wooed by the former Communists, he soon walked out, toppling Berlusconi. Running on its own without alliances in the elections that followed, Bossi's party rose to 10.1 per cent. But when it dropped to 4.5 per cent in the 1999 European elections, the Northern League went back to a coalition led by Berlusconi, where for the next decade it remained a raucous but largely ineffectual junior partner in his successive governments. A year after the last of these was ousted in 2011, Bossi—long since weakened by a stroke—was engulfed in a corruption scandal and pushed aside by his number two, Roberto Maroni, who took over leadership of the party. When national elections came round again in 2013, the League fell to a mere 4 per cent, and seemed consigned to national irrelevance. In his party's original stronghold of Lombardy, however, Maroni won the Presidency of the region, at the head of a coalition with a large majority, after having promised he would step down as

secretary-general of the League if he won. Evidently reckoning that the party had no future in national politics, and that he might as well enjoy the fruits of regional office, this was not much of a sacrifice.

On 15 December 2013, the Northern League held a primary to choose Maroni's successor, a day before the Democratic Party—the latest mutation of the centre-left in Italy—held the primaries that elected Matteo Renzi its new leader. The media, for some time agog at Renzi's charms, focussed their attention on this far more important race, one which was genuinely contested. The League's internal consultations, by contrast, were a formality: the future of the *Carroccio*—as the League was often called after the mobile battlefield altar borne aloft by the medieval league of Lombard cities—was decided over lunch by Maroni and two of his supporters, Flavio Tosi, the popular mayor of Verona, and Matteo Salvini. There it was agreed that the not particularly alluring post of secretary-general would go to Salvini, reserving for Tosi a future as a possible leader of the centre-right as a whole once Berlusconi, increasingly discredited, had gone. Ranged against an ailing Bossi, now past seventy and a shadow of his former self, Salvini duly cruised to victory with an 82 per cent majority. He was still virtually unknown to the Italian public at large.

Beard and earring

Not, however, to local militants in Milan. Born in 1973 to a business manager and his wife in Milan's suburbs, Salvini joined the Lombard League at the age of seventeen, while still at high school. At twenty-four he was already a city councillor. In these early years he frequented Leoncavallo, the city's most important 'social centre'—a radical enclave of 'alternative' activism and focus for the various currents of the metropolitan left—where he would drink beer, enjoy shows and cultivate his passion for the anarchistic singer-songwriter Fabrizio De André. As a newly elected councillor he defended the centre against the mayor of the time, Marco Formentini—himself a Leghist—who wished to clear the site, leading to violent street clashes. In 1997, when the League organized 'Padanian elections' mimicking national polls to set up a parallel parliament of its new nation and, as in any self-respecting assembly, parties brought forth internal quasi-parties, Salvini became head of the 'Padanian Communists', a list decked out with the hammer and sickle: Che Guevara badges, beards, earrings and desert boots were standard

kit.¹ ‘We are taking up the classic themes of the left, from advocacy of a strong, active state to liberalization of soft drugs’, the *Sole delle Alpi* assured its readers. The League had use for some cover on the left, which this current supplied. As Salvini would later explain: ‘the League was winning votes from every quarter: right and left, atheists and Catholics. It was necessary to organize accordingly.’

From the outset Salvini’s tactics, part calculated and part spontaneous fruit of a turbulent political instinct, were to wrong-foot opponents with sudden changes of tack, contriving to talk to everyone—particularly their lower impulses. So on the one hand he struck a resolutely plebeian note, telling the council chamber, in one of his earliest contributions: ‘I trust that wearing a tie is not obligatory. I can wear a formal shirt instead of a T-shirt, but don’t ask more of me.’ He would also accompany trade-unionists from FIOM to talk to striking workers at a big engineering plant outside the city. At the same time, his seat on the council offered him publicity for agitation around ‘Roma–Muslim’ and security issues. Salvini was always to be seen on the side of this or that householder who had shot a burglar, or oppressed citizens who had taken the law into their own hands. Under Formentini, the League governed Milan, yet Salvini seemed to be in opposition: organizing demonstrations outside Roma camps and the mosque in the city’s Viale Jenner; calling on the centre-right majority to show an ‘iron fist’; introducing a toll-free hotline for citizens to report delinquencies by immigrants.

Never missing festive occasions at local markets, Salvini was soon a regular guest on regional TV stations. He was also active in the League’s various media enterprises, writing for its newspaper *Padania* and becoming director of Radio Padania. Like the PCI of old, the League was an omni-competent organization, deploying its militants across a wide range of activities, wherever their particular abilities were required. A politician and a journalist who never ceased attacking ‘small-time politicians’ and ‘hacks’, Salvini was a creature of the party through and through: reading the mood of the rank and file, building up a network of relations and old friends, always repositioning himself in good time, never ending up out of favour. That flexibility would involve spectacular

¹ Of the passions of this period, sympathy with the Basques remains, and a Tibetan flag still hangs in Salvini’s living room, at a time when social centres have become for him the home of ‘lice’.

about-turns: Salvini understood that pragmatism forgives everything. In this he was following the example of Bossi, whose myth he cultivated with a mixture of genuine sentiment and a discreet dose of flattery.

Historically, the strongholds of the Northern League were Lombardy and Veneto. Milan, however—Salvini's birthplace—was not one of its natural habitats. A city of fashion, finance and international conferences, Milan opens out to the world, while Padanian localism closes in against it. The League would always find it hard to put down roots there; Formentini's mayoralty was the temporary upshot of the earthquake of Tangentopoli, and passed with it. The famous Leghist crowds for Bossi's rallies, filling the sports grounds of the Val Seriana, near Bergamo, never materialized in Milan. Yet in spite of this, Salvini prospered, clearing one electoral hurdle after another. After seven years as city councillor, his dynamism carried him to Brussels in 2004 as Eurodeputy for the League; his biggest vote came from the outskirts of Milan, areas which, relegated to the shadows by 'progress' from the late eighties onwards, felt threatened by lack of jobs and the spectre of immigration. But Salvini was soon back in the city, passing his Euro-seat to a colleague in order to lead the League's group on the Milan council. He returned to Brussels in 2009, this time keeping his seat in the European Parliament on becoming formal leader of the Lombard League in 2012. That made him a logical candidate to succeed Maroni as head of the Northern League as a whole the following year.

Gifts from Renzi

Giving wings to Salvini's rise was the historical conjuncture. All too visibly, the dreams of Altiero Spinelli, the Italian progenitor of the United Europe ideal, had not materialized. As many respected scholars pointed out—not least the sociologist Luciano Gallino, who devoted the last years of his life to explaining all that had gone wrong—the apex of the EU had increasingly become dominated by a consortium of bankers and bureaucrats, dictating policies to elected governments regardless of democratic mandates, imposing neoliberal austerity and welfare cuts, and threatening the collapse of the single currency should any alternative be pursued. High levels of unemployment, spectacular inequality and spreading insecurity were now conditions of life for millions, as one authoritarian response to the financial crisis of 2008 followed another: the Greek memorandum, Europe Plus, the Fiscal Compact, all obediently adopted

by the bipartisan cartels in office at the expense of their voters—a process Gallino called a ‘coup d’état by instalments’.²

In Italy, which had fared worse than any other country from the Treaty of Maastricht, early 2014 saw the advent of its most arrogant government of the post-war epoch, bent not only on ramming through neoliberal ordinances against workers and teachers, and rigging the electoral system to its advantage, but aiming for the first time to dismantle key provisions of the democratic Constitution of 1947, in order to concentrate power in its own hands. Matteo Renzi had gained the Premiership in February 2014 without even being a member of Parliament, by seizing control of the Democratic Party and concluding a pact with Berlusconi. Rapidly stripping the DP of its traditional pretensions to be a force of the left, and enjoying the fulsome support of President Giorgio Napolitano—once a Communist, now a pillar of the establishment—the Employers Federation, the banks and multinationals, not to speak of the media, Renzi believed himself so popular that he could carry off a referendum to alter the Constitution according to his specifications. To his consternation, forces across the political board, not least ordinary voters, rose up against him. His scheme met a crushing defeat, with some 80 per cent of the young—whom Renzi claimed to represent—voting against it. Among the victors of the night was Salvini, who had campaigned vigorously to kill the proposal, and emerged strengthened from the result.

As leader of the party, Salvini—the ‘Captain’, as his followers call him—appeared a youthful, fresh figure to many Italians, if in the vulgar style of the Northern League. In fact, this ‘new’ political personality was anything but. When Salvini started his political career in the nineties, Berlusconi’s Forza Italia had yet to emerge, the internet barely existed, mobile phones were futuristic objects, and printed communications were sent by fax. By 2013, after twenty years of ascending through its ranks, this veteran politician had emerged unscathed at the top of what was now the oldest political party in Italy. But in the public imagination his place on the shelves of the electoral supermarket would rapidly be labelled *New Line!* For that, however, he needed more than just the novelty of his name. To break through to national prominence, two major changes in his *modus operandi* were required: a new electoral strategy and a new political technology.

² Luciano Gallino, *Il colpo di stato di banche e governi*, Turin 2013.

The Northern League built by Bossi was a separatist movement targeting two enemies: Rome, nest of bureaucratic corruption, and the South, land of idlers and parasites. By the time Maroni took over in 2012, the impasse to which this appeal had led was clear. No separation had been achieved, or looked remotely likely, and the party's survival—it was now limping along at 3 to 4 per cent in the polls—was in question. On becoming leader, Salvini decided to change course. Instead of Rome, he would attack Brussels; instead of Southerners, he would target immigrants. In so doing, he would speak in the name of all Italians—the whole nation—against oppressors and intruders from without. Discarding the derogatory anti-Southern rhetoric of old, and erasing memory of the time when he had handed out T-shirts bearing the legend 'Milan works, Rome guzzles, Naples shoots', he set about winning sympathies and votes in the Mezzogiorno too. In the past, Bossi had vainly attempted such a break-out from Padania, hoping to unite all the autonomist formations in the rest of Italy, an ambition for which he lacked any credibility. Salvini proceeded differently, dropping the old, faded watchwords of autonomism and federalism, and focussing instead on the taxes of an unheeding, marauding state, on the vexations of a tyrannical Europe and the depredations of sponging immigrants. An essentially localist movement was converted into a party thinking and operating on a national scale. By undoing the opposition between two Italys, the League was now capable of bringing together Puglian farmers, Sicilian fishermen, Venetian entrepreneurs and Lombard professionals—casting all as victims of a distant, soulless power and a tidal wave of aliens.

Salvini's central political objective—to transform a failing, scandal-ridden party, stuck in a blind alley after its impotent partnership with Berlusconi, into something quite new—involved a complete rethink of the League's founding principles. Overnight success was not assured. His first move sought to tap the growing frustration with the European Union, in a country whose every budget had to be approved by a Commission that seemed to demand sacrifice after sacrifice from it—a situation accepted by both the centre right and centre left virtually without batting an eyelid. Salvini's inaugural address took characteristically crude aim at Brussels: 'We should take back the economic sovereignty we lost in the European Union. They've broken our balls'—'This isn't the European Union, it's the Soviet Union, a gulag we are leaving with whomever is ready.' European elections were coming up in 2014, and Salvini decided to campaign on a frontal assault against the EU with a

call for Italy to exit the euro—an idea hitherto banished to the margins of political discourse by both right and left. The demand did not catch fire. Far from improving its score, the League lost half its previous handful of seats in the European parliament.

Morisi's commandments

What transformed a strategy that might have stalled under another leader was Salvini's make-over on social media. The League had acquired a speaker willing to set up camp in television studios, an indefatigable master of sloganeering and invective, but one who was still basically formed by the communication technologies of the pre-internet age. What changed this was the appearance of Luca Morisi, a 45-year-old informatics expert from Mantua and a past councillor for the League with a penchant for philosophy. Morisi ran a company called Sistema Intranet with his business partner Andrea Paganella; they had no employees, but plenty of institutional clients. Morisi took Salvini in hand when he was already inseparable from his tablet and accustomed to Twitter, but had a negligible Facebook following. Morisi told him he was on the wrong track: Twitter was a confining option because it was basically 'self-referential', fostering confirmatory messages. 'The people are on Facebook', he explained. 'That's where we have to be.' Under Morisi, a social media staff was set up for Salvini, which quickly became far more important than any party body.

Morisi laid down 'Ten Commandments'. Salvini's posts were to be written by Salvini himself, or made to seem so. There must be no let-up: posting would be flat out, every day, all year round. There would be comment on events that had barely happened yet. Posts should be simple: punctuation regular, short parataxis, 'calls to action', repetitive. Use 'we' rather than 'I' wherever possible, identifying with the recipient. Read comments and sometimes reply, went the guidelines; survey opinions on the wing, and not always on serious subjects—trespass into non-political fields. The result was a media operation functioning like a daily newspaper, thanks to a publishing system created in-house and known as 'the beast'. Content was published at fixed times on affiliated pages and reactions monitored instantly. Soon Morisi and his colleagues were publishing eighty to ninety posts a week on Facebook alone, where Renzi managed no more than ten. One of the basic tricks, inculcated by Morisi's decalogue, was to stick to the same words, so that Salvini would

seem more like a saloon-bar character than a conventional politician: *Amici*, a post would begin—and it was always a capital A—‘in the face of’ this or that, ‘we will not give an inch’, releasing a tidal wave of virtual kisses and smiles.

The tone of these posts shifted buoyantly back and forth between irreverence, aggression and seduction; from encouragements to get worked up against the enemy of the day (‘illegals’, ill-intentioned magistrates, the Democratic Party, the EU), to soothing photos of food or the sea, to Salvini hugging some activist, or out fishing, in a continuous superimposition of the public and the private. For Morisi, this mixture would be one of the sociological secrets of Salvini’s success: blending private life and a playful spirit with politics became the recipe for an effective anti-politics, giving expression to the anti-systemic impulses of ordinary citizens. Public opinion was fed with an unceasing stream of images of Salvini consuming Nutella, cooking tortellini, biting into an orange, looking at the sea, listening to music, relaxing in front of the TV: every day a piece of his personal life was ‘shared’ with millions of Italians.

Amid all this, Salvini was perpetually promising political thunder and lightning. The promises were so numerous and virulent that all too often commentators, distracted by how crude and dangerous they were, would forget to check what had become of them. The aim was not so much to achieve a determinate factual result—a law, a reform, a political shift, a substantial change in citizens’ lives—as to give the impression of wanting to do so and fighting hard to succeed. Salvini’s stances are talking points, whose object is to galvanize a media circuit around his person, following the golden rule: ‘as long as people talk about it’. His social eclecticism is calculated to present a reassuring human face alongside all his provocations: in spite of the legend and the radical analyses that present me as a retrograde monster, an unreliable populist, I am basically a good person. I speak as I do because I’m like you, so trust me. The message: at last the man in the street has found a leader who thinks and acts as he does, for better and for worse.

Salvini knows how to react to criticism with lively good humour. Posting an image of himself on the beach at Viareggio, with a carnival float mockingly portraying him as an emperor, he adds the caption: ‘Pity about the weather, but great floats! Smiles, so many kids and so many photos, not a louse from the a-social centres in sight. Anyone who can’t

laugh at themselves isn't worth much.' To a Facebook comment on this: 'Fascist!', Salvini replies: 'Fascist?!!' But what about racist, populist, xenophobe, no? Kisses.' Irreverent, pungent, sarcastic, human. Then there is television, where he is a tireless performer. Unlike other politicians, he can raise ratings. A master of incitement capable of capturing viewers' attention, broadcasters need him, just as he needs their shows as propaganda platforms. Uproar never puts him off: on the contrary, polemical missiles thrown at him mostly help him to turn the tables on his critics, who are far removed from the problems of 'the people' and don't know what they're talking about.

These performances in turn feed into Morisi's other magic formula, of which Salvini swiftly became an adept: cross-mediality. Appear on TV while posting on Facebook; sift through the comments as they come in and cite them on the show; when the broadcast is over, make a clip of it and post that too. The impact of these tactics soon became clear. Between mid-January and mid-February 2015, Salvini had virtually double the TV time of Renzi, Prime Minister of the country and leader of a party which had just won nearly seven times as many votes as the League—an inversion of the proper order of attention so spectacular that one of Renzi's mouthpieces was left publicly dumbfounded. The feat was a sign of a transformation under way that would set Salvini apart among his peers. In 2013, when Morisi first approached him, Salvini had just 18,000 followers on Facebook. By mid-2015, he had a million and a half. Since then, 95 per cent of Facebook users in Italy have seen one of his posts. Today he holds the European record for Facebook followers, with 3 million fans and over 4 million interactions.

Left competition?

For at least his first two years as leader, Salvini was considered by both the centre-left and the centre-right as not much more than an unruly circus performer, able to talk himself up and create a stir in the media, but incapable of transforming his political initiatives into a governing majority. The general feeling was that though he could still feature as a supporting actor in Berlusconi's efforts to regain power, he would be put back in his box when it came to a national contest, confined to his own redoubt with about 10 per cent of the vote. The Renzi regime's rise and fall, and the EU's unrelenting austerity, enabled his escape from this fate—but with some way to go if he was to reach the highest levels of the

political system. For in these years the really striking challenge to the established order, and its incarnation in ‘Renzusconi’, came not from the League, but from the Five Stars Movement created by Beppe Grillo, which had emerged with a larger number of votes than any other party in the elections of 2013—over six times as many as the League—and occupied the limelight in the battle against Renzi in both Parliament and the Constitutional referendum, fighting his regime from a populist position to the left rather than to the right of it. In a competition between the two challengers, the League remained outclassed.

Salvini, however, held a trump card of his own. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the terminal decline of the old mass parties, Italian politics has tended to become theatre, the culture of the spectacle permeating public life as nowhere else in Europe. The dissociation between ideologies, parties and citizens leads everywhere to a personalization of politics and a cult of leaders—terrain on which the right is typically at an advantage. Italy has been a test-bed for this trend.³ Over the past twenty-five years the country has repeatedly entrusted itself to leaders and organizations of a highly personal stamp—post-ideological and ‘populist’ in the worst sense of the term. Berlusconi was the first of these figures to emerge, in the nineties. By 2013, he had lost his allure, and Renzi, Grillo and Salvini competed to occupy the same celebrity space, each with his own brand of popular appeal. Where Berlusconi would address the nation on his television channels from a grand desk in the library of his villa at Arcore, Renzi staged multi-media events in Florence at which he preened himself among tame writers and pop stars. Adept at TV performances, he took acclaim for these as self-evidence of voter support, never bothering much to conceal his sense of superiority over all and sundry, which proved his undoing. Grillo had a rapier wit in his days as a comedian, and could orchestrate large outdoor theatrical gatherings with considerable skill. But he was recessive by nature, preferring to operate the movement he created by remote control. Salvini, on the other hand, was a man of the people with a genuine common touch, and liked nothing better than to mingle with the masses, as one of them.

What was once the mainstream of the Italian left, increasingly confined to exclusive circles, boards of directors and dinners with the Prime Minister

³ For an analysis of this development, see Mauro Calise, *La democrazia del leader*, Rome–Bari 2016.

at €1,000 a head, seemed to have forgotten which side it was on. Salvini, by contrast, travelled all over Italy getting his hands dirty, seeking out the resentments of those who were shut out by the market and left at the edges of society, connecting with a silent (or silenced) majority treated with arrogant contempt by the elites. For many under-30s, a generation brought up without politics and largely indifferent to them, this was a ‘Captain’ who seemed one of their own—smart and uncomplicated, sympathetic and far removed from the old nostrums. It was enough to see him in action at a discotheque, where he would sometimes turn up after an evening with party militants, drinking a cocktail from a plastic beaker and surrounded by curious admirers queuing for a photo. No other Italian politician could carry off such scenes so naturally.

While the fragmented left took refuge in defending symbols of the past, or internal wrangling and factional disputes, Salvini would be meeting workers outside the factories—TV cameras poised—regaling them with a moment of media attention after decades of obscurity and isolation. While the left was organizing miniature electoral pacts in one poll after another in order to reach the threshold needed to get any seats, repeating the same ineffectual appeals for ‘left unity’, Salvini would be thundering against the offshoring of plants, and calling for protectionist measures against unfair competition by those who trampled on workers’ rights around the world and could not or would not regulate themselves. The result of all this was not long in coming. By 2016, the League was already the second party in ‘Red Tuscany’, harvesting high scores in the urban peripheries of its cities, while the Democrats held onto the affluent centres. In Emilia-Romagna, Umbria, Marche—regions once privileged zones for the Communist party and its successors on the left—Salvini’s appeal was rapidly gaining ground.

Into government

In the general elections of 4 March 2018 Salvini received the first substantial fruit of his labours. Campaigning in a centre-right alliance with Berlusconi and Fratelli d’Italia, a residue of post-war neo-fascism, the League—it had by now dropped ‘Northern’ altogether—quadrupled its support to 17.3 per cent of the vote. With that, Salvini’s primary strategic aim was in the bag. While the bedrock of its base remained the North, the League was now also present in the South: it had won the support of a broad cross-section of the country. In a historic reversal,

it had moreover for the first time overtaken its rival Forza Italia, which lagged at 14 per cent. Overall, the centre-right coalition took 37 per cent, making it the largest single bloc in the new Parliament, with over double the number of seats of the centre-left, where in the wake of Renzi's debacle, the Democratic Party lost a quarter of its vote. Far the greatest victor, however, was the Five Stars Movement which, led by Luigi Di Maio, a 30-year-old from Naples, emerged head and shoulders above any other party, with 32.7 per cent of the vote.

The mathematics of the result required a marriage of convenience of some kind, since none of the three forces commanded a parliamentary majority. Politically, the least incongruous outcome looked like an agreement between the Five Stars and the centre-left, but the Democratic Party had still not cleansed itself of Renzi and blamed the Five Stars for his downfall, foreclosing any rapprochement. The League for its part would have nothing to do with the Democrats, while the Five Stars would not touch Berlusconi. That left as the only option a deal between the Five Stars and the League. It took three months of bluffing and bargaining to reach an agreement. Eventually, the two parties announced a 'contract for government', outlining, in general terms, their proposed areas for executive action. This allowed the Five Stars—a movement whose rationale was its complete autonomy and distance from 'the old politics'—to reassure its electorate that the agreement did not mean an alliance of the familiar sort, just a simple contract, full stop. In June, a government was formed. Salvini and Di Maio became Vice-Premiers, each controlling a senior ministry under a Premier picked by the Five Stars, Giuseppe Conte, an academic lawyer hitherto unknown to the public. The arrival in office of this 'Yellow-Green' coalition was greeted with a general apoplexy in the establishment media, for whom populism of any kind is anathema, let alone a combination of two different brands of it.

In fact, the resemblances between the two parties were more behavioural than political: an unflagging stridency, anti-system rhetoric, continual reference to enemies within and without (the ruling caste, the elite, intellectual bigwigs), invocations of 'the people', top-down internal organization, an aggressive online presence tending to simplify any topic into slogans or jokes in poor taste. Substantively, their most significant commonality was hostility to Brussels and questioning of the single currency, held responsible for the imposition of austerity and Italy's economic stagnation, under the yoke of the Fiscal Compact. But the programmes

that each wanted to pursue in breaking these chains underlined the political difference between them. Essential for the League was a flat tax, the classic recipe of a radical right appealing to small business—the shopkeepers and traders who formed its traditional social base in the North. For the Five Stars, it was a guaranteed basic income to help the jobless, the precarious and the poor, above all in the South. The distributional consequences of these demands were directly opposite, drawing the line between the two forces in unmistakable left-right terms.

The prospect of a governmental accord between such adversaries, relayed in the composition of the executive and the distribution of responsibilities in Parliament, had no precedent in Italy. The new Prime Minister was a complete novice to political life. For some 90 per cent of ministers, this was their first experience of cabinet office—the highest ever recorded for an Italian government, which underwent a generational remaking as well, with the median age of members of both government and Parliament an all-time low. Traditionally, the first hundred days of an Italian government see the tabling of key policy proposals and symbolic reforms. The early days of this coalition were very different. Few programmatic themes were developed into draft legislation. After a period of the two parties—at once similar and quite dissimilar—studying each other distrustfully, the government's first actions were timid and awkward, by-passing Parliament. The genesis of the few policy proposals discussed in the Council of Ministers was slow and opaque. Legal decrees announced at press conferences arrived in Parliament a week or more later, now altered in untraceable ways. Once put before the Chamber and Senate, they monopolized the agenda, reducing the role of individual deputies to a minimum. The difficulty of managing the political collaboration between the Five Stars and the League paralysed Parliament, reducing its scope still further.

Both Salvini and Di Maio conduct themselves as though they are in opposition. Taxed with the failings of the government, their standard response is that complications are the result of their predecessors' mismanagement, or that powerful interests—financiers and bureaucrats—are blocking and interfering with executive action. Nevertheless, the public hunger for change is such that the Yellow-Green approval rating remains high, leaving the Democrats and Forza Italia cornered time and again, neither of them able to offer any credible counter-propositions. Besides, the contrast of values between the governing parties in a sense covers the

spectrum from ‘right’ to ‘left’, from the migration issue to civil rights, large-scale public works to international relations: as counter-balancing forces they catalyse the inclinations of two opposing constituencies, fusing them into an alliance. So the government continues to dictate the agenda of public debate, each day creating a new affair to grab attention and forcing other political forces to chase its narrative lead.

Dividing offices

The internal trajectory of the two partners within the coalition is another matter. When the government was formed, the Five Stars went for ministries with more socio-economic weight, the League those with greater symbolic and identitarian profile. Salvini got the Ministry of the Interior, while Di Maio took Economic Development, Labour and Social Affairs. At first sight this looked as if the Five Stars, with a much larger vote share than the League, had commensurately received the more important positions—they included infrastructure, health and culture—with greater potential impact on the electorate. But this was not to be, because the formation of the government was from the start subject to surveillance from Italy’s ‘deep state’—the Presidency, the Bank of Italy, the Bourse, and, not least, the Italian head of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt—which made sure that the ministries that mattered as far as economic decisions were concerned—essentially Finance and European Affairs—were kept out of the hands of either of the two parties. Berlusconi had been brought down by the powers of this cabal in 2011, Napolitano coordinating the operation. Mattarella, his ex-Christian Democratic successor, is less blatantly manipulative. But Napolitano set new benchmarks for Presidential interference in domains that the Constitution had sought to shield from such meddling, and when the coalition proposed ministerial candidates whom Mattarella deemed insufficiently loyal to the EU, he did not hesitate to veto them. Investors, he explained publicly, would not be happy if they were appointed; voters didn’t matter. So Five Star influence on Italy’s budget, where the Fiscal Compact was designed to enforce the dictates of Brussels, was largely neutered from the start. Predictably, once the principal proposal of each party’s respective election campaigns—a guaranteed minimum income and repeal of delays to retirement—threatened to become law, the European Commission and its relays in the deep state stepped in. After months of arm-wrestling, such initiatives were watered down. To date, Di Maio hasn’t a great deal to show for his part in government. The

prospect of a European recession setting in this year—official estimates now predict zero growth for Italy—would close down the Five Stars’ space for manoeuvre completely.

Salvini, on the other hand, has maximized his presence.⁴ As Minister of the Interior he is now almost always dressed in the jacket of the police or Carabinieri, like any good sheriff. To his second-in-command he has entrusted the Ministry for Family, another excellent platform for cost-free pronouncements of high-decibel media impact. Meanwhile he has reserved for himself the most important of all moral responsibilities of a decent government: a crusade against clandestine immigration. Forcible denial of harbour rights to the NGOs that had been saving lives in the Mediterranean has quickly become his signature policy, a harder-the-better line that has become a goose laying golden eggs in the opinion polls. The Five Stars’ years of propaganda against a maritime ‘invasion’ have taken their toll, constraining them to follow the League onto the terrain most favourable to it, with occasional ineffective remonstrations against particularly crude gestures of xenophobia. Salvini’s slogan ‘Italians First’, characteristic of his political instincts, resonates so well with popular anxieties that hearts have been hardened against even the most harrowing sights of refugees cut adrift on the high seas. When Salvini was informed by the attorney’s office in Palermo that he was under indictment for his abandonment of migrants rescued by the Italian coastguard vessel *Diciotti*, he recorded the moment by opening the official notification on Facebook Live, where it was viewed 1.1 million times, prompting 111,000 responses in the form of emoticons expressing pleasure, anger, surprise, sadness, 82,000 comments and 25,000 shares. On Twitter his supporters’ hashtag #complicediSalvini elicited 192 tweets and 833 re-tweets per hour. With just a few dissidents, the Five Stars voted to absolve him in the Senate.

It takes time for social or economic measures to pass, and for their effects to be felt. While the sorts of reforms the Five Stars have sought to introduce are subject to barricade by the EU, the League’s punitive

⁴ Morisi and Paganella, who had been at the heart of negotiations for a joint programme with the Five Stars and often accompanied Salvini on his missions, received their reward the day after Salvini took office in the Palazzo Viminale, where they were both given contracts: €65,000 a year for Morisi and €86,000 for Paganella. Together with four other members of the original Sistema team, this pair is worth the League’s entire Parliamentary group.

actions against despairing migrants are the stuff of drama, made for TV. Instant news, they cost nothing, and the EU will not gainsay them—Macron is no more welcoming than Salvini. Continuous capturing of the headlines delivers at the polls, the League's ratings rising sharply, the Five Stars' falling. Added to the tilting of these advantages is a contrast in the leaders and structures of the two parties. The League, once described with pride by Maroni as 'the last Leninist party in Italy', is nearing its fourth decade of existence, which has given it a battle-hardened corps of militants and cadres. The Five Stars Movement, which denies it is a party, is little more than a relatively thin online archipelago: consultations of its membership about decisions rarely exceed 30,000 participants. Its leader Di Maio is quick-witted and personable, but lightweight, a nimble tyro. Salvini, a bruiser with a quarter-century of political experience behind him, is a professional, with far greater confidence and charisma. Within a few months of the Yellow–Green coalition taking office, there was already little doubt which colour was stronger. The party with half the votes of its rival in the ballot boxes of 2018 was imposing its hegemony as if it had won twice as many.

The regional elections so far this year have translated this reversal into cold political fact. All three were held in the South, where the Five Stars had swept the board in 2018. In Abruzzo, the Five Star vote fell from 39.8 to 19.7 per cent, while the League vote jumped from 13.8 to 27.5 per cent; in Sardinia, the Five Stars collapsed from 42.4 to 9.7 per cent, while the League increased from 10.8 to 11.4 per cent; in Basilicata, the Five Stars dropped from 44.3 to 20.3 per cent, while the League rose from 6.3 to 19.2 per cent. In each case the Five Stars ran alone, the League as part of a centre-right coalition with Berlusconi, the Fratelli and assorted other groups, which won control of every region. Salvini now bakes his bread in two ovens, joining the old Forza Italia and the far right in local government while keeping up his alliance with the Five Stars in Rome. For him, this is a perfect situation, resembling the pattern in the eighties, when the Socialist Party allied itself with Christian Democracy in national government, but with the Communist Party in the regional ones.

Today, the League stands at the pivotal point of Italian politics. Salvini deals the cards and dictates the rules of the game, choosing his friends and his enemies, forcing the media to follow slavishly what he says—his promises, provocations, a 'common sense' which, after years of obsessive repetition on TV, in the papers and online, really seems to have become

just that. The ‘leaguing’ (*leghizzazione*) of Italian politics has become naturalized. Thus it is now considered normal—and this goes for parts of the centre left as well—to accuse maritime NGOs of being ‘sea taxis’ in cahoots with human traffickers; to repeat that what citizens need above all is to feel safe; to view immigration as an exclusively destabilizing phenomenon that must be limited. Arguments once a niche speciality of the League and neo-nationalist circles are now swallowed and regurgitated as irrefutable.

Europe?

The 2019 European elections will probably see the League win 30 per cent of the vote, outshining the Five Stars, who will be lucky to hold second place ahead of the Democrats at some 20 per cent, where both are currently level-pegging. Salvini would then have a choice: either continue in the present government with the allies he controls so well, or find a pretext for taking the country back to the polls—under an electoral system rigged by Renzi to entrench himself or Berlusconi in power, which backfired without becoming any fairer—aiming to win a parliamentary majority in alliance with the rest of the centre-right. That would make the ‘Captain’ the Prime Minister of Italy formally, as well as in fact. Recognizing that it’s one thing to be regarded as the boss, but another to have an official investiture, this has always been Salvini’s ambition, and he is now nearly there.

What accounts for the fact that, among the leaders of the Eurosceptic right in the major countries of the EU, Salvini is the only one with a real hope of becoming the ruler of his country? Why does he stand out from the rest? In France, for all her attempts to distance herself from her father, Marine Le Pen is too closely identified with his legacy—her party’s recent change of name to the National Rally underlining her need to try and detoxify it. In Germany, the memory of Nazism sets narrow limits on the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland. In Spain, Franco’s dictatorship lasted much longer, compromising any chance of a direct filiation to the present until the very recent, and still rather marginal, emergence of Vox. In Britain, the bulwarks of the first-past-the-post system are such that Farage could never even get himself elected to parliament. Salvini faces none of the problems these counterparts confront. In Italy, neo-fascism was long ago domesticated within the political system as one more or less legitimate tradition among others, its very

survival ensuring that the League was different. Ideologically, though Salvini belongs to the radical right, he has never repudiated his semi-origins in the left. ‘When I’m taken for a fascist’, he says today, ‘I have to laugh. I was identified by Roberto Maroni as a possible communist in the League because I was considered the closest to them on some questions, even in the way I looked.’ As late as 2015 he was a fan of Syriza, and still laces his public utterances with themes and a sensibility that were once classically left-wing, like the need for a public investment bank or repeal of neoliberal slashing of pensions. Le Pen received her party as a paternal gift, those of Weidl and Abascal only go back to 2013–14. For over twenty years, Salvini fought his way up and across a complicated political ladder, as they never had to do; in sheer animal energy and magnetism, in this gallery he is in a class by himself.

Above all, however, Salvini is uniquely fortunate in operating in a national context defined by the virtually complete irrelevance of the left, reformist and radical alike. In France, Spain, Britain and even Germany, popular forces exist on the left that resist the ruling doxa and are capable of attracting votes for a break with it. In Italy there is no longer anything of the kind. Domestic socio-economic and geographical conditions have also favoured Salvini’s rise. No major state in the EU has suffered more from the straitjacket of the euro than Italy, whose per capita income has scarcely increased since monetary union came into force, and whose growth rates remain miserable. The country trails the industrialized world in social mobility: from one generation to the next, children inherit not only (perhaps) the goods of their parents, but also their levels of education and income, and types of occupation—or, if they don’t, they fall below them. As in many other countries, the social escalator is broken, but in Italy the effects are particularly marked. Then, too, as a peninsula with the longest continuous coastline of any country in the EU and as an emigrant nation, not used to being on the receiving end of movements of population to which it has historically contributed so much, Italy has found itself at their crossroads—and this in a period of economic retrenchment, the cake sliced ever more unequally, with growing numbers looking for work and social security. As such tensions become more electric, Salvini is the perfect lightning conductor for discharging potential class conflict into a struggle of the poor against the poor.

This is a pattern that favours Italian electoral conformism of a conservative cast. In a climate of general estrangement from politics as an active

commitment—election turnout has declined from a steady 90–95 per cent in the First Republic to 50–60 per cent today—this has time and again rewarded the apparent man of the moment in a merry-go-round that avidly demands and uses up new leaders, who punctually reveal themselves incapable of satisfying the needs that brought them to office. Salvini is the latest of these, the vehicle of an anger and discontent that has wrong-footed the balladeers of modernity and progress who believe—or would have others believe—they live in the best of all possible worlds. How Salvini might behave in the Palazzo Chigi, were he to become Prime Minister, is another matter. Could he become another Berlusconi, who in the end changed rather little, for all his posturing?

There, Salvini's attitude to the EU could be a litmus-test. Berlusconi was notable more for his gaffes than for his misconduct in the European Council; even when it became clear in 2011 that Brussels was determined to evict him, he declined to make a fuss about it. In external as in internal affairs, Salvini is more ruthless than Berlusconi, and more ideological. In the 2019 European elections, he looks forward to the emergence of a bloc of right-wing populism—the 'sovereignist international' envisaged by Steve Bannon—capable of challenging the grip of the Euro-cartel of Christian and Social Democrats on the Strasbourg Parliament, and has been active in articulating the alliances necessary for one. This is a project, it should be said, where the League and the Five Stars part company. Salvini has long been an admirer of Putin, in the manner of Trump. But America matters more than Russia, and the affinity of his person and style with the incumbent of the White House is far greater than with that of the Kremlin. What this means, in current conditions, is alignment with Trump's bid to bring China to heel. By contrast, to Salvini's displeasure, Di Maio has welcomed Xi to Italy, bearing his gifts of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The difference is equally marked in their outreach within Europe, where Di Maio has been much more radical in his approach, expressing warm support for the *gilets jaunes*, whom Salvini has denounced as wreckers. Salvini's soul-mates in France, Hungary, Poland and elsewhere are truculent, not insurgent. In the EU, he has so far done little more than rattle the bars of the 'cage' of Brussels, not trying to break them. The current Italian budget conforms to the Commission's 'advice'. Should the European elections result in a showing by nationalist parties like the League that is strong enough to change the international equilibrium

at the heart of Europe, he might become less tractable. But the objective pressure of financial markets on the Italian government, and any other tempted to rebel against the Fiscal Compact, will remain unaltered. Realism is as much part of Salvini as ruthlessness. Taking responsibility for an institutional, rather than merely verbal, conflict with Europe is less likely than a pragmatic adaptation to the status quo. The social base of the League may be hostile to big banks, foreign regulations and foot-loose multinationals, but its sensibility is unremittingly capitalist. Bossi, too, fulminated against Brussels in his day, yet the League voted for the Treaties of Maastricht and Lisbon. For Salvini, the single currency was a helpful scarecrow on the way up. Once on the heights, it can be put away. Porous borders cannot. They remain his true passport to power, where the Union makes no difficulty.

What should now be plain is Salvini's ability to join genuine impulses of resistance and good faith with ubiquitous egoistic resentments, kneading them patiently together in the language of the streets, and outwitting the test of facts. Fears and bad news are still petrol in the motor of an angry, self-absorbed populism. In the absence of a utopian realism—positive ideologies capable of conveying dreams and giving them practical shape—there has seemed to be a choice between only two paths. Either a slow suicide, subsiding into apathetic waiting for the kind of progress that spells regression, 'reforms' that impoverish those who didn't have much to begin with. Or—as has in part already happened—immediate surrender, opening the door to the knock of the populist next door, bearing his magic potion: in hand, a cup of hemlock. For Italy, just a sip more to go.