

Habemus Presidentam? Not Just Yet

judith harris (April 19, 2013)



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In theory, the electoral college, composed of all members of Parliament and the Senate, plus a selection of regional delegates, totals 1,007 "grand electors." This morning the last of the three votes requiring a two-thirds majority took place without a successful candidate, so that this afternoon only a simple majority was required, or 504 votes - four fewer than the actual 508 expected because of absentees, who included one woman MP in hospital because about to give birth.

With the largest single voting bloc, Pier Luigi Bersani's Democratic party (PD) supposedly had 496 votes committed to their official candidate, former Premier Romano Prodi. However, the ballot was secret, and it had already been predicted that some would ignore the party directive and vote their own choice, as in fact some did. In theory, the candidacy of constitutionalist Stefano Rodota', backed by Grillo's 5-Star Movement (M5S), was the second most likely to succeed, with 163 theoretical votes; in point of fact, Rodota' scored significantly better, meaning that he picked up votes from other sources. Bersani's party, in fact, was split over the question, with his leftist ally, Nichi Vendola, openly preferring Rodota'. Another who bolted in his own way was the babysitting Premier Mario Monti. Although Monti is a personal friend of ex-Premier Prodi, Monti's neo-party, Scelta Civica, with 69 votes, announced it would not vote Prodi.

It did not escape notice that Grillo's suggesting the dignified, highly respected Rodota' for president was the angry comedian-turned-politician's first statesmanlike act. Following this gesture, in the wake of the third failed vote that required a two-thirds majority Thursday, a representative of Grillo's Five-Star Movement (M5S) sent a tweet intimating that, if Bersani's PD would vote for Stefano Rodota' as president, a government could be guaranteed. "Rodota's candidacy remains on the carpet," Nichi Vendola insisted as he left Parliament.

However it ends, tough times lie ahead for Bersani in the party whose leadership he is losing. During the past two days he tried without success, first to impose the candidacy of former Catholic trade union leader Franco Marini, and now Prodi. Both these failures are more than raps on the knuckle. Until today, at least, Bersani has flatly rejected the concept that his supposed followers might ignore his counsel. But when it came time to vote for Marini, Berlusconi's PdL voted for him, but Bersani's own PD did not. That stunning rejection showed to what extent Bersani has alienated many of his traditional followers, among them some of his top aides. It is unlikely that Bersani can coax his party back into docility and remain at the helm.

Silvio Berlusconi, at least, must be celebrating. The two men, Prodi and Berlusconi, share a keen mutual dislike. Back in 1995 Berlusconi had called Prodi "a useful idiot." The following year Prodi responded, remarking that, "Berlusconi throws out numbers like a drunk." That same year, he also said, "Berlusconi is ridiculous and a liar, and that's that." When Prodi emerged as a candidate for President this Spring, Berlusconi, who until recently had entertained his own presidential dreams, said acidly, "If Prodi wins, we all go to live abroad."

In the background outside Parliament today were, literally, two rival demonstrations. One group in front of Parliament was composed of Silvio Berlusconi Freedom Party (PdL) supporters shouting invective against their old political bête noir Romano Prodi, while, in a neighboring piazza was another demo of slogan-shouting fans of Prodi, the economist from Bologna who defeated Berlusconi in the struggle for the premiership in 1996 and again in 2006. Another and admittedly less important sideshow was mounted by Senator Alessandra Mussolini, who showed up in Parliament wearing a T-



shirt sporting the slogan "The Devil Wears Prodi." "This is a country that's split in two," commentators here were saying.

If so, the split is generational. An interesting sideshow was the disappearance from center-stage of the Northern League, sidelined by the dynamism of the two leaders who most clearly represent a reaction against the old pols' way of doing things and the demand for a generational shift: Beppe Grillo's hefty chunk of followers (the "Grillini") and the supporters of Florentine Mayor Matteo Renzi, 37. Renzi had been a valiant ally of Pier Luigi Bersani in the Partito Democratico (PD) until Bersani snubbed Renzi by dropping him from the roster of grand electors for the presidency. At that point Renzi moved out from under Bersani's shadow and began openly challenging him.

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