

LETTER FROM ROME

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Even fifteen years ago sheep could safely graze in the fields opposite our apartment. But luxury apartments began to be built apace and the land which had cost 50 lire a square metre now sells for as much as 130,000 lire. There is only one patch of green left in the area, yet the proprietor of the whole district can now erect four blocks of apartment buildings on it, having won his case against the Town Council. "They always win their cases against the municipality" is the comment in the district; "they have plenty of money and the municipality is bankrupt."

This example is typical of Rome's development since it was invaded by the Piedmontese who unified Italy in 1870. At that time Rome was a city of less than 250,000; now it has a population of 2,500,000. Land speculators have determined the growth of the city according to the simple principle of maximum profit. Only Zola could do justice to their rapacity. Town planners and architects have long denounced the rape but little has been done to stop it.

The story is the same elsewhere. Every now and again a jerrybuilt structure subsides in the streets of Naples. A few years ago, a whole quarter illegally constructed collapsed in Agrigento. A rash of unauthorized buildings has ruined Italy's seaside resorts and national parks, such as that of Pescasseroli. They are patent evidence that politicians have shirked their responsibilities.

Successive governments have ably guided Italy's rapid postwar evolution from an agricultural to an industrial economy, but they have not kept pace with the accompanying social transformation. The cities' acute growing pains have been mentioned. There are also the courts, which cannot cope with the cases they should handle, providing an illustration of the maxim, "justice deferred is justice denied"; and there is chronic dissatisfaction with the cumbersome, complex health service and medicare systems.

These factors help explain how the grand design of Italian politics of the 1960's has become a faint hope for the 1970's. The grand design was the centre-left coalition between Christian Democrats and Socialists calculated to draw votes from the Com-

munists. But the Socialists rather than the Communists have suffered from the centre-left. To many electors, who concluded that the Socialists had been corrupted by power, the centre-left governments looked little different from their predecessors. Consequently, in the 1968 elections, after six years of centre-left governments, the Socialists' vote fell from 19.9 to 14.5 per cent of the total, while the Communist vote rose from 25.3 to 26.9 per cent, and the Christian Democrat vote increased from 38.3 to 39.1 per cent.

There are now three Socialist parties. Only the farthest left, the Social Proletarians, reject the centre-left formula, but the Socialists led by Francesco De Martino and the Social Democrats are dubious about it. The coalition split last year because the Social Democrats feared it was sliding into a position where it would be conditioned by Communist support. The successor minority Christian Democrat government resigned to negotiate for the resumption of the coalition.

Regional elections were held in June of this year. Five regional assemblies (Sicily, Sardinia, Aosta, Trent-Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia) have been functioning since 1948, but these were the first elections for the other fifteen regional assemblies foreseen by the postwar Constitution. The institution of regional governments is aimed at putting politics in touch with local problems. This has indeed been accomplished in the northern regions, where there is a tradition of honest administration, but in Sicily it has merely allowed the Mafia to exert more leverage. So far, regional government has reflected more than it has modified local conditions.

The centre-left parties were reassured by 58.2 per cent of the June vote: 31.1 per cent of the votes went to the far-left (Communist and Social Proletarian Party) and 10.6 per cent to the right-wing parties. The two Socialist coalition parties were strengthened, polling between them 17.4 per cent of the vote as against 14.8 per cent when they were united in the 1968 national elections. The Christian Democrats' other partners, the Republicans, had the most striking success, increasing their proportion of the vote from 1.8 to 2.9 per cent. Support for the Christian Democrats and Communists was virtually unaltered.

Hopes for the centre-left fluttered again after the June regional election, whose results were a mandate for the centre-left to push ahead with social reform. But at the same time it strengthened each of the coalition Socialist parties, which rallied support by emphasizing the differences between them.

Prior to the elections, the De Martino Socialists

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refused to give guarantees that the centre-left formula would be followed on the local level whenever it was mathematically possible. De Martino Socialists will collaborate with the Communists in the regional assemblies of Emilia-Romagna and Umbria.

For the Social Democrats this is keeping a foot in both camps: they accuse the De Martino Socialists of collaborating with the central government's opponents on the local level. But the De Martino Socialists' fundamental dilemma is how to assert their identity as the party of the working class when the Communist Party remains a free-wheeling critic of all government failures and the left-wing of the Christian Democrats is more radical than most Socialists. Add to this the fact that the Socialists have always proved friable over principles or under pressure, and the difficulties of the centre-left are patent.

While the De Martino Socialists do not want any "apartheid" against the Communists, the Social Democrats style themselves as the anti-Communist left. As this division runs between former allies the debate becomes acrimonious. If the De Martino Socialists see the Social Democrats as traitors of the working class, the Social Democrats accuse the De Martinians of being Communist stooges.

This forces the Christian Democrats into the role of ringmaster for its brawling Socialist allies. In fact, instead of a reinforced coalition setting to work after the June elections, Italy plunged into a prolonged governmental crisis. The Christian Democrats brought on the crisis, but the main problem in resolving it was finding formulas which would satisfy both Socialist allies. The Christian Democrats could readily have reached an agreement with either of them separately. It could just as readily reach an agreement with the fourth coalition partner, the Republicans, whose main current concern is the deteriorating economic situation. It was in these circumstances that the Christian Democrat economist Emilio Colombo managed to put yet another centre-left coalition government together in August.

But no coalition can survive if it is rent every few years by a Donnybrook over a religious issue. One of the earlier coalition governments collapsed over education questions when Catholic interests were said to be threatened, and now the divorce squabble has put the coalition in a quandry once again.

Both the Christian Democrats and the Socialists did their best to avoid the divorce issue, which was not part of the coalition program. The divorce pro-

posal—which has already passed the Lower House—was a private member's bill, introduced by Socialist deputy Loris Fortuna. But in February, when negotiations for resumption of the coalition were *in cours*, it leaked out that ever since 1967 the Vatican had been sending diplomatic notes to the government, warning it that to introduce divorce in Italy would be a unilateral violation of the Lateran Pacts. The Socialists and the intellectually influential, if small, Republican Party were wary; they wanted to know how the Catholic party would handle the Vatican before committing themselves to forming another government with it. The present government is now negotiating with the Vatican, although the bill is being read in the Senate. If the Vatican is not prepared to reach a compromise, the Christian Democrats will presumably go along with its coalition partners and parliament in accepting the bill.

In parliament, the Christian Democrats enjoy only the support of the neo-Fascist party in their opposition to divorce. Divorce advocates claim there are 500,000 "emigrants' widows," whose husbands have sought work and second wives elsewhere, and two million couples who have entered into separations. They add up to a powerful divorce lobby, but opinion polls show that if the issue is taken to the country at large, by means of a referendum or early elections—as the bill's opponents hope—the vote could well go against divorce.

The intense passion roused by divorce distracts the parties from real but less inflammable issues, such as the reform of the upper secondary school, which has become mandatory to bring it in line with the reformed lower secondary school and university. Other issues too, like reform of the health services, tend to be obscured by the pother over divorce or the maneuvers between and within the two Socialist parties, the Republicans and Christian Democrats, whose negotiations for resumption of the coalition seemed like a search for an alchemical formula which would transform gross politicking into golden government.

Apart from particular issues, Italian politics is bedevilled by a still deeper malaise: its estrangement from the life of the nation even as it pretends to cope with its problems. The system of proportional representation, with votes being cast for parties rather than candidates, both fractures the body politic and makes representation abstract. Politicians' language is a complicated code decipherable by a small circle, mainly composed of fellow politicians. Italian politicians are fertile in vague formulations which hide unpleasant realities. Aldo Moro, the Christian Democrat who was Prime Minister for five

years up to 1968, was a master of this art. One of celebrated coinages was "parallel convergences," to disguise the fact that the Christian Democrats and their Socialist coalition partners would only achieve harmony somewhere over the horizon.

The parties have all but devoured the state: political influence is paramount in powerful semi-state bodies such as the radio-television monopoly or the giant holding company I.R.I. Parties bargain over the assignment of directive positions in the innumerable corporations inherited from the Fascist era. The ambition of the appointees to these powerful and well-paid positions is to serve their political patrons. There are politicians of ideals and integrity, conscious of the pitfalls of the system. But it is difficult for them to buck it or emerge because they must rely on the approval of the party machine rather than on the electors who have their say once every five years.

Italy is still awaiting its social revolution. An elite was responsible for the Risorgimento and elite political parties, modelled on the English pattern and elected by limited suffrage, ruled Italy up to the first world war, unrepresentative of the mass of the people who supplied the gun fodder during the war. Some who, equipped only with patriotic rhetoric, saw their companions slaughtered, determined to alter the system in the postwar years. Two parties could then speak for the masses: the Socialists and the Popular Party, forerunner of the Christian Democrats. The Vatican in its blindness stifled the Popular Party, and the Socialists, running true to form, were indecisive. An ex-Socialist and journalist, Benito Mussolini, led the revolution.

When that hoax was unmasked, the Communists were in the forefront. They had the lion's share in the Italian Resistance. Two new political giants, the Christian Democrats and the Communists, dominated the postwar scene. Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti was prepared to go to any lengths—even to including the Lateran Pacts in the new constitution—in order to divide power with the Christian Democrats led by Alcide De Gaspari. But it was De Gaspari who ditched Togliatti in the end.

Partly because of the fear of Communist strength, Italy's postwar revival was more a restoration than a renewal. A fine constitution was forged, democratic principles were sincerely affirmed, and tribute was always paid to the ideals of the Resistance. But much of the old structures and spirit remained: not only the plethora of semi-state bodies and a penal code inherited from the Fascist era, but also the labyrinthine bureaucracy inherited from the Piedmontese of the Risorgimento. The social revolution

had been deferred again. The poorer classes were still excluded. These poor were not, however, sent to carve out an empire in Africa; instead, over two million went to build up their own economic empires in Australia, Latin America, Canada, and elsewhere in Europe. They were outsiders, their votes tied up by the Communist Party, which never participated in government.

It has been the Communists' argument all along that incisive social reform is impossible without their participation in a coalition government. The feebler the centre-left, the stronger the Communists' case. Their strength has derived from their role in the Resistance and their uninvolvement in government: they can pose as the champions of justice.

But the Communists are also struggling to keep abreast of the times. For the young Party members at the Congress in Bologna last year, the ritual references to the Resistance were no more pertinent than references to the Risorgimento or Renaissance. They sensed that society is stirring while the parties sleep. The non-governmental parties are not immune to sclerosis: in fact, the Christian Democrats have the youngest leadership because whoever emerges is quickly toppled by an intraparty conspiracy.

It is a hopeful sign that several groups have moved outside the narrow limits of party politics. The students were the first to do so in revolt against both a Mafia of professors intent on preservation of their power and the politicians who have done nothing to adapt universities to their greater intake. Rome University, built for 10,000 students, now has over 70,000. The 700,000 strong Catholic workers' movement (ACLI) has cut its links with the Christian Democrats because it finds the political perspective narrowing. Most important of all, the unions, at the end of last year, broke their political alignments for common action which went beyond issues like work contracts to broader problems like workers' housing. A hopeful sign too is the recent appearance in iconoclastic, avant-garde Italian films of the leftist intellectual who mouths only clichés.

All Italian political parties run the danger of being caught between the indifference of the majority and the contempt of the minority who regard them as purblind. Italy has an independent magistrature, a free press and a mercifully uninfluential army, but its politics creaks at every joint. To justify itself, the centre-left must find a way to turn from its internal tensions and verbal complexities to the country's problems. This is the only way to attract those forces of whom, despite all, the Communists remain the political depositaries.