

CASTAGNETTI ON THE DEFENCE OF CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY

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Where and what is the political centre in Italy? Have the traditions of Italian Christian Democracy been able to survive in a coalition with the Left? In a recent interview with EPP News, Forza Italia leader Silvio BERLUSCONI gave a highly critical account. Here, Pierluigi CASTAGNETTI, National Political Secretary of the Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI), which is in government coalition under Prime Minister d'ALEMA, gives his perspective.



EPP News: How far are you able to promote core Christian Democratic ideas in the current ruling coalition in Italy?

Castagnetti: As a people's party, we have set certain political priorities for the coalition: school and education, family, support for more children. Moreover, we can state categorically not only that these ideas have been supported at every level, but that they have achieved concrete results.

A law has just been passed on educational equality - a law which at last recognises the principle that the national educational systems is composed of both state and private schools.

This is something for which we have been waiting for half a century, something we are firmly committed to. Among other advantages, it grants resources to kindergartens and primary schools to a hitherto unknown extent.

At the level of the family, PPI deputies have succeeded in pushing through a whole series of amendments to the financial statutes on the State Budget, the government's most important politico-economic function: for the first time it's been possible to distribute resources to families, rather than taking them away.

We have also raised the issue of the negative birth rate, emphasizing the grave consequences this could have for our country if this is not reversed.

This caused astonishment at first, but a few weeks ago the President of the Council himself put it on the agenda.

EPP News: The Italian judiciary has been criticised, both by the Italian public and by certain political leaders, as corrupt and politicised. How important is this factor in Italian politics?

Castagnetti: Italian Christian Democracy has unquestionably been among the most punished by the inquiries into party finance. Many of its leaders, up to the highest level, were belatedly rehabilitated when the cyclone of polemics had already broken their reputations and honour, and too late to re-establish the truth in the eyes of the public.

The case of ANDREOTTI, now completely exculpated, has been the most paradoxical example.

A parliamentary commission is to be set up to lead an inquiry into the events of those

years. Without any question, some judges acted out of political motives. But that does not stop us from recognising that the degeneration of the system had to be stopped.

EPP News: How do you see cooperation between parties of the political centre in Italy?

Castagnetti: **The process of change and transition we have embarked on in Italy** is not over. This state of evolution and change makes it difficult to make a short-term forecast. All the same, we can say that among the most evident is the bipolar turning-point, which is not, however, bi-party rule. We should be clear on that.

The parties of the centre are at the centre of the two opposed political movements and - on certain issues - refer to common roots, meaning they can agree on the same direction, one that passes through the political divide. But the conservative pol and the centre-left have shown they have very different political strategies and goals on key issues, such as for instance education, solidarity, and economic liberty.

EPP News: Italy is one of the countries in Europe most affected by the problem of immigration. How do you propose to fight the rise of xenophobia and political extremism?

Castagnetti: While it's true that our country is concerned by immigration, Europe as a whole is on the threshold of an ineluctable enlargement which will generate serious worries for certain parts of its population.

We are all affected by the great phenomena of demography and migration. The re-emergence of the demons of intolerance, xenophobia, and anti-Europeanism disturbs, I think, all responsible people in Europe.

And that is why the recent alarm raised by the events in Austria provoked common action by all the heads of government in the European Union, from AZNAR to JOSPIN, from SCHRÖDER to Tony BLAIR, from CHIRAC to d'ALEMA. I think that the current symptoms of xenophobia have found fertile soil because of a lack of politics of any great calibre.

The soil in which these phenomena take root is that of generations growing up marinated in values such as indifference, egoism, fear of the future, rejection of others. The political duty is both to support the process of understanding, and the acceptance of diversity, allowing solidarity to replace fear.

EPP News: The Partito Popolare Italiano has adopted a very strong position, within the EPP, on the Austrian government alliance which has brought HAIDER's Freedom Party into government with the Austrian People's Party. What are your reasons for this?

Castagnetti: The PPI's demand was the same as that of our Belgian, French, and Spanish friends in the EPP. I would like the other Italian members of the EPP, among them BERLUSCONI, to reflect on what has been said by AZNAR and BEYROU.

We agree with them, because the essential - democratic - nature of the EPP must be defended. DE GASPERI, who was a fierce anti-Communist, would never have accepted an alliance with Rightist parties.

Nor KOHL, who was a great hero, nor the other leaders of the CDU, would have dreamt of an alliance with the Republikaner or with other Rightist political formations. For the simple reason that if a party of the centre does not place clear limits to its Right, it risks losing its identity, its image, its role. A party of the centre making an alliance with the Right means playing the Right's game, it means changing its real nature.

I would simply like to add a reminder of the genesis of European democracies. They were

all won through hard struggle, and at an international level have seen the United States allied with Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Here in Italy, Christian Democrats, Socialists, Communists, and Liberals, joined forces in the same struggle to defeat fascism, leading to democracy and the Constitution.

Since then, while remaining severe in our judgement of the historical responsibilities of all dictatorships, of Nazism as of Communism, we cannot bring ourselves to make comparisons of this kind. We would also like to add that the fact that HAIDER had Nazi parents does not preoccupy us; what does preoccupy us is what he says now.

His reminders of the past and of the SS don't bother us either, even if it's a matter of unacceptable expressions of appreciation which we would reject.

The affair is serious, but it's not what fundamentally disturbs us at the moment. Haider is a problem for us because what he is currently saying is fomenting a tissue of xenophobic, racist, sentiments, of intolerance which is present in different European countries, among them Italy. Such sentiments, if they are not stopped immediately, risk spreading.