

BERLUSCONI SWEEPS TO VICTORY IN ITALIAN "PRIMARY" + ANGELA MERKEL - WHERE THE CDU GOES FROM HERE

EPP News 11, April 19 - 2000

Italy's 57th government since World War Two hangs by a thread following Forza Italia's sweeping gains in regional elections last Sunday (April 16). Involving 15 out of 20 of Italy's regions, and 30m voters, these were a de facto primary for the Italian general elections due within the next year: a head-to-head contest between Prime Minister Massimo d'ALEMA and opposition leader Silvio BERLUSCONI, President of Forza Italia. The result - more than 50% of the vote for the Centre-Right - was a clear victory for Berlusconi, who called for immediate elections: "I do not believe that this government can legitimately continue." + Angela MERKEL, the first woman leader of a major party in Germany, talks to EPP News about the legacy of Helmut Kohl and where the CDU goes from here: "His great achievements for German unity, and for European unity too, are undisputed. However, we cannot hide the mistakes that have been made under the carpet."

FORZA'S APRIL EARTHQUAKE

The Italian regional elections - the first to see direct elections of regional presidents - dealt a severe blow to Prime Minister d'ALEMA's centre-left coalition. "Earthquake in April", blazed the front page of the Corriere Della Sera. "The result is unequivocal - sovereignty must be handed back to the people", said opposition leader Silvio BERLUSCONI.

Making a clean sweep of the four major regions in the wealthy industrial north, and capturing Lazio - of which Rome is the capital - the centre-right Freedom Alliance also won in two small southern regions where the Left had imagined itself impregnable.

Divided into some 10 quarrelling parties since the fall of Romano PRODI's government in October 1998, the Centre-Left won in only seven regions, against the eight (Liguria, Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto, Lazio, Puglia, Abruzzo, and Calabria) won by Berlusconi's electoral alliance with Umberto BOSSI's Northern League.

Prime Minister Massimo d'ALEMA's offer to resign immediately was rejected by President Carlo Azeglio CIAMPI, who called for a parliamentary vote of confidence instead: immediate elections would prevent the planned referendum set for May to eliminate the remaining elements of proportional representation in the Italian electoral system. D'Alema said that in light of the referendum it would be a "grave error" to dissolve parliament now. Berlusconi riposted that, instead of a referendum, Forza and the Northern League, the two main opposition parties, should offer a proposal for electoral reform as part of their programme in immediate elections.

Prevented by new rules on campaigning from using his tv channels to campaign, Berlusconi had fought a flamboyant campaign using a hired cruise-liner for his campaign HQ, and widespread billboard advertising focussed attention on the national contest. But the victory of the Centre-Right, with its commitment to a new federal model for Italy, also indicates support for greater decentralisation. "The Northern League had the merit of being the first to raise the problem of a form of state leading to federalism," said Berlusconi. "And we say 'yes' to a federal reform,".

MERKEL: "CDU STILL PARTY OF EUROPE"

Scientist daughter of a Protestant pastor, brought up in the former GDR, the CDU's new leader Angela MERKEL, 45, is the first woman to run a major party in Germany - and a rarity in Europe altogether. Pictured right at the CDU Congress in Essen, she talks to EPP News.

EPP News: *Is it possible, in practice, to separate the remarkable political achievements of Helmut Kohl from his failure to respect the law on party finance?*

Merkel: What we want is to adapt Helmut Kohl's legacy for the future. His great achievements for German unity, and for European unity too, are undisputed. However, we cannot hide the mistakes that have been made under the carpet. But I am certain that things will, over the distance, be seen in proportion.

EPP News: *Do you think Germany - and perhaps Europe altogether - is now in a completely new political phase?*

Merkel: I think there will be a further development of the European project, of its content. We must set ourselves new tasks. The challenges resulting from globalisation cannot be resolved by nations acting alone. Think of conservation, the challenges to the social market economy, or international organised crime. Beyond that we need to make the EU fit for its imminent enlargements.

EPP News: *On European integration specifically, the mood in Germany has been changing from some time. On the euro, particularly. And Edmund Stoiber's CSU appears to be more or less Eurosceptic, at least on enlargement. How do you see CDU European policy evolving?*

Merkel: The CDU was and remains the party of European unity. Eventually, the advantages of a united Europe are there for all to see. But every enlargement, at some point or another, hits limits. With a growing number of Member States, agreements and compromises do not get easier in the EU. We need to have the courage to talk honestly about our goals, about the concrete politics and limits of European Union enlargement. Moreover, the EU cannot be responsible for everything. So we need to be straight about dividing up responsibilities between the Union and the Member States. We want a functioning Europe that is closer to the citizen.

EPP News: *First woman leader of the CDU, and the first from the "new Länder" in eastern Germany. Much is being made of these facts. Do they have any real practical significance for you, or for CDU policy?*

Merkel: Every human being is formed by his or her surroundings and experience. And every politician can bring his or her experiences into politics. That is completely normal. If, 10 years after German reunification, the leader of the CDU comes from the east, that for me is a piece of living German unity. Apart from that, in politics I don't think in terms of men and women. Our Basic Law states that men and women have equal rights.

EPP News: *Two years in politics is a short time, especially given the many challenges that now face you. What do you hope to achieve in the period up to the Bundestag elections in 2002?*

Merkel: Our first goal is to get back to issues in politics. We need to devote all our energies to our role as an opposition party. The party congress in Essen set us decisively

on the right road. The Red-Green federal government has no clear ideas about the conclusions to be drawn from the great changes of our time. That applies to economic and social policy, but especially to domestic and European policy. Our overall vision is to offer people, in a time of change, a sense of direction. And finally we want to be back in government in 2002.