

Martin Kettle on Italy's government in waiting
Optimism Of The Will

Most of the international comment about the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) decision to abandon its name and re-launch itself has inevitably focused on global themes. The crisis of the PCI has been treated as yet another, if particularly emblematic, aspect of the collapse of the Bolshevik tradition.

Well, it is partly that, of course. It is true that none of the events in the PCI which culminated in the two-to-one vote for change at March's Bologna congress would have happened in the way they did, had it not been for the collapse in Eastern Europe. The idea of a change of the party's name had been around for many months beforehand, but it hadn't been widely supported. It took the breaching of the Berlin Wall last November 9 to propel Achille Occhetto - who had trenchantly rejected such a change at the PCI's Rome congress eight months earlier - into action. Just three days after the Wall came down he travelled to Bologna to announce the need for a relaunch and a new name.

Yet the speed of that response was misleading. After all, no communist party in Western Europe ought to have been better protected by its own past *against* the need to move so quickly. But paradoxically, the PCI has always acted as though it felt direct responsibility to respond to the actions of communist regimes, even those with which it had long ago broken. The same happened after Tiananmen Square, when the PCI was swamped with intense argument. Nothing like that occurred in any other Western communist or socialist party.

The explanation for this is that in Italy the stakes are higher. The PCI, which even today commands 27% support, remains a huge force in Italian political and social life. The statistics are familiar: 10m votes, 1.4m members. And you only have to go to a PCI stronghold like Modena, Siena or, of course, Bologna to recognise a sense of communist establishment which doesn't exist in any other

part of the West.

Yet, as ever, the PCI faces a fight for political legitimacy at national level. The defining feature of all Italian governments since 1945 is that, however they may change in other ways, they will always exclude the PCI. So it is hardly remarkable that one of the essential characteristics of the modern PCI is its hunger for government.

It is easy to mock this desire for respectability, which also reveals itself from time to time in the party's somewhat excessive sense of its own dignity. But since the PCI is a respectable party, in the best sense, it is not exactly surprising that its leaders should be driven by a sense of indignation that almost any other Italian party, however corrupt or small, can get in on the Rome governmental act while the PCI is barred.

In this light, the PCI's decision to reform itself can be seen as entirely consistent with its tradition. It is trying, yet again, to claim its true place within Italian political life. Its change of identity becomes not a controlled retreat in the face of the global crisis of communism but, at its most optimistic, another daring attempt to break the mould of Italian politics.

Ever since the failure of the 'historic compromise' policy

of the 1970s, in which Enrico Berlinguer tried to bring the party together with the ruling Christian Democrats, the key question for the Italian Left has been the relationship between the Communists and the Socialists. In Berlinguer's time, this may not have appeared so obvious, since the Socialists were a spent force and the PCI's pretensions to exclusive embodiment of the democratic socialist tradition were more beguiling.

Time and Bettino Craxi have proved those hopes false. If the limited but significant reassertion of the Socialist Party under Craxi has proved anything, it is that the PCI cannot any longer truthfully sustain its claim to be the exclusive voice of the Italian Left. Occhetto admitted as much in Bologna and he also stressed that the PCI cannot confine itself forever to preaching ideals. It has to have a strategy for getting power.

That is what Occhetto's moves are all about. If the PCI were simply to sit back and wait for power, it would gradually fade from view. From time to time there would be tactical opportunities, of course, like the current split within the Christian Democrats, caused by the frustration of its left

wing with its leadership's supineness in dealing with the skilful Craxi. But the PCI also desperately needs to make its own luck.

The debate about how to do that has been going on for more than a generation. As the voting in Bologna, which clearly reflected party opinion around Italy, made evident, the PCI is today still very divided. But it is a mistake to imagine that division will necessarily mean a split.

What it does mean is a shift in the balance of forces within the PCI. The left, whose figurehead is Pietro Ingrao,

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argues for a staunchly independent party, against close ties with the Socialists; and it bitterly opposes the PCI's existing pro-Nato foreign policy. The right, embodied by Giorgio Napolitano, wants to go social-democratic, to work closely with other parties, particularly the Socialists, and within existing international alliances. Achille Occhetto comes historically from the left of this spectrum. In inter-party terms, therefore, the significance of his current campaign is that this left-winger has thrown his authority behind the policies of the right wing.

For the moment, much will hang on the results of the local elections in Italy in May. These are extremely important, involving all municipal and regional governments. If the PCI vote slides badly, then the party could be heading ever downwards into another decade of decline. If the vote holds up, it will be taken as vindication of Occhetto's daring.

After that, all kinds of possibilities are open, and not just with Craxi, though the Socialist leader has been notably warm towards the PCI's Bologna decisions. Either way, the realignment of Italian politics is firmly underway. The question now is whether Achille Occhetto turns out to be Italy's Francois Mitterrand - or its David Owen.

