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BOOK REVIEW

Il presidente del consiglio dei ministri. mediatore o decisore? by

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Il Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri is a most welcome addition to the Italian-language literature on the country's political executive. This monograph can be understood as both complementary and as an alternative to another recently published (two-volume) work on the Italian prime minister, namely, *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell'Italia repubblicana* (edited by Sabino Cassese, Alberto Melloni, and Alessandro Pajno for Laterza in 2022). It is complementary because – like the latter – it deals with the same topic but – like the edited volume: *Il presidente del Consiglio dei ministri dallo Stato liberale all'Unione Europea*, by Leonida Tedoldi – extends the analysis to the pre-republican period. It is however alternative – both because it prefers a slimmer format and because of its ease of consultation.

The author of *Il Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* is Francesco Clementi, an expert in Italian and Comparative Public Law, who is well known for his dissemination activity in the national mass media. The book is an overview of the evolution of the role of the Prime Minister from the time of the 1848 Albertino Statute (first promulgated for the Kingdom of Sardinia, then serving as Italy's flexible 'Constitution' from 1861 to 1948, when the Republican Constitution finally replaced it) to today. The discussion's *leitmotiv* is the continuous tension between actual political practice and the (inadequate) attempts to endow the chief executive office with an up-to-date normative framework reflecting the political needs of the time. It is worth noting that Clementi's monograph is the first of a series of works on Italian and European political institutions, edited by Clementi himself, published by Il Mulino under the series title, '*Riscoprire le istituzioni*' (Rediscovering Institutions).¹ In accordance with the series' aim, this book seeks to 'describe' as well as 'prescribe', 'in the awareness that in democracy – at least in democracy – it is possible to reform everything if the aim is to improve its functioning and defend its principles' (p. 11).

Il Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri contains five chapters, plus an appendix including a list of all heads of government from 1848 to 2022 by legislative term, and a summary of the main laws promulgated to regulate the office. Most of the first part of the book (chapters 1–3) provides an overview of prime ministers' formal powers, and of how office holders have interpreted them over more than 17 decades. It is worth noting that Clementi pays particular attention to the role of key personalities and the most important critical junctures in Italian political history shaping the office of Prime Minister.

The first chapter introduces the prime ministerial office in Italy (or in the Kingdom of Sardinia before 1861) and presents it as an 'absent' institution, due to the lack of clear provisions about it in the constitutional documents. The analysis stresses the effects of this 'absence' during the monarchy and the post-WWII democratic transition. Subsequently, the second chapter looks at the republican period, following a similar approach. The third chapter, in turn, zooms in on and analyses the evolution of the bureaucratic/political staff (or the lack of), established to support the chief executive. Chapter 3 is important, in that it clarifies how cabinet ministers and legislators have conceived of the limits of prime ministerial action in different historical periods and how this has informed laws and regulations.

Chapter 4 opens the examination of the dynamic aspects of the premiership, with a detailed discussion of the chief executive's impact on government formation and termination. Finally, chapter 5 addresses the challenges the Italian Prime Minister has faced as a result of phenomena such as the 'presidentialisation' of politics and the Europeanisation of national political processes. Against this background, Clementi reminds us how summitry has strengthened the Prime Minister at the expense of the Cabinet and Parliament and in spite of the constitutional principle that the head of government is first among equals (pp. 158–159).

Overall, Clementi's monograph is a valuable source for those seeking a broad yet careful understanding of one of the key institutions of the Italian political system. The book is written in a clear and direct style. This characteristic is likely to make it attractive as much to an educated generalist audience as to specialists. A specific quality of the work is that it takes into due consideration how actual politics develops within formal legal provisions. Political scientists, in particular, will find useful references to legislation and constitutional debates, which will help enrich their empirical studies. In this regard, the systematic appendix is an additional positive feature of the work.

A possible weakness is that the book neglects an important aspect of the prime ministerial role that has become especially relevant since the 1980s given the empowerment of chief executives. Specifically, the book does not delve systematically into what a prime minister does in office between the government formation phase and cabinet termination. How does a prime minister allocate policy responsibilities? How does she organize cabinet decision-making and handle ministerial conflicts? When does the Prime Minister pursue consensus and when does she impose policy on her colleagues? Why are there longitudinal variations and differences between subsequent prime ministers? Answers (even if tentative) to some of these questions would have made an already very good analysis even stronger.

However, one should also recognize that the book (like the series it is part of) is not intended as a detailed investigation for specialists. Rather, it attempts to provide the analytical categories and intellectual coordinates necessary to enable readers of all kinds to understand prime ministers' action and the main constraints and opportunities relating to such action. From this viewpoint, the suggested weakness does not make it more difficult to achieve this aim, as in fact the book does with some considerable success.

Note

1. This series follows a former series by Il Mulino, edited by the political scientists, Maurizio Cotta and Carlo Guarnieri, 'Le istituzioni politiche italiane'. In this series, the volume *Il governo* (The Government, by Maurizio Cotta and Francesco Marangoni) was devoted to the analysis of the executive in its entirety rather than to its head.

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