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On: 30 November 2013, At: 06:32

Publisher: Routledge

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Contemporary Italian Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rita20>

Party, coalition, premiership: the role of Silvio Berlusconi in coalition dynamics and its determinants

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Published online: 25 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Michelangelo Vercesi (2013) Party, coalition, premiership: the role of Silvio Berlusconi in coalition dynamics and its determinants, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 5:3, 292-308, DOI: [10.1080/23248823.2013.846541](https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2013.846541)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2013.846541>

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Party, coalition, premiership: the role of Silvio Berlusconi in coalition dynamics and its determinants

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(Received 21 February 2013; accepted 6 July 2013)

Silvio Berlusconi has unquestionably been one of Italy's most important political figures since the early 1990s. The general election campaign of February 2013 demonstrated that he is anything but out of the political game. Consequently, it seems worthwhile to examine Berlusconi as a prime minister and coalition leader. This article seeks to understand the extent to which he was able to command and guide his governing coalition, as Prime Minister, as well as his influence and the constraints on his actions. After presenting the theoretical framework, the article examines Berlusconi within the context of Italian political history and explores his impact on coalition governance by illustrating two cases of how he managed intra-coalition conflicts during his second term of office. Finally, it discusses the findings and highlights the resources Berlusconi was able to deploy 'against' his allies and the constraints he faced as Prime Minister. A brief comparison of Berlusconi and other Italian prime ministers is provided.

Keywords: Silvio Berlusconi; coalition governance; Italian politics; Forza Italia; party leadership; conflict management

Introduction

There is no question that, for the past 20 years or so, the media tycoon, Silvio Berlusconi, has been a central figure on the Italian political landscape. His impact on Italian politics has been extraordinary from several points of view. After entering the political competition in 1994 and forming a completely new party, he won three general elections (in 1994, 2001 and 2008); he governed for approximately nine years; and, directly or indirectly, he was responsible for a number of political innovations, especially in the field of communications strategies (Fedel 2003; Campus 2010a) and the further personalisation of politics (Campus 2010b). During the period spanning his *discesa in campo* (the decision to 'take to the field') in 1994 and his resignation as Prime Minister in 2011, party competition and public debate were characterised by sharp conflict between his supporters and his detractors. This clash, together with various features of the Italian party system of the so-called Second Republic,¹ provided the basis, from 1994, for the emergence of two main coalitions: one supporting him, the other opposed to him. After a period of uncertainty about his role in his current party, the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL),² he eventually decided to act once more as the leader of an electoral alliance, this time in the campaign for the general election of 24–25 February 2013.

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This article deals with a very specific aspect of Berlusconi's political actions, namely, his role as Prime Minister and as coalition leader. Since the beginning of his political career, he has been able to bring together political parties that would otherwise never have been able to coalesce. Moreover, his prime-ministerial style has been portrayed as very different from the leadership styles of other Italian prime ministers (Calise 2007). Here, I will attempt to contribute to our understanding of Berlusconi through an investigation of his behaviour vis-à-vis conflicts within his coalition.

The article is divided into six main parts. First, I will highlight the theoretical premises that inform the work. Subsequently, I will provide a brief overview of some of the ways in which Italy's First Republic functioned, considering prime ministers' powers and conflict management in government coalitions during this period. Thirdly, I will describe the main changes occurring in Italy after the breakdown of the former party system and the birth of the Second Republic. The fourth step is the illustration of the research design and its methodological aspects. I will then analyse the role of Berlusconi by focusing on his longest lasting cabinet, that is, his second (2001–05). I will consider the strategies adopted by members of the centre right coalition in order to manage some of the conflicts they faced in those years, with the actions of the head of government being at the centre of the investigation. Finally, I will discuss the findings and attempt to compare Prime Minister Berlusconi with other Italian prime ministers and his colleagues outside Italy.

The theoretical premise

To start, I have assumed the priority of structural factors over personal factors when it comes to shaping prime-ministerial actions. In particular, I have started with the idea that party factors have a major impact (Barbieri 2001): personalities, important as they are, cannot override the effect of a sturdy political constraint. Several studies of prime ministers (e.g. Jones 1991; Pasquino 2005b; Poguntke and Webb 2007) have shown that, of the party-related factors, leadership of the coalition and party leadership (Barbieri and Vercesi 2013) are more crucial resources than others. For this reason, I have mainly focused on them, and the remainder of the article is based on this theoretical premise. Being both coalition leader and party leader should be very important strengthening factors for a prime minister. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the party's share of parliamentary seats and the size of the cabinet's majority also play a role (the strength of the prime minister being positively correlated with both [Vercesi 2012c, 273–274]).

I aim both to describe how Berlusconi acted when in government and to explain, in terms of these variables, why he did so. I will also attempt to understand whether and how coalition and party factors affected his actions during the most conflictual moments of the cabinet's life – that is, when the coalition was most at risk. My starting idea is that moments when the coalition experiences conflict and it becomes more difficult to keep the partners together may – more so than moments of smooth decision-making – be the times that reveal most about the strength of a premier and their capacity to impose their will on recalcitrant allies.³ For this reason, as we shall see, I have singled out two cases of serious inter-party conflict management and used them to study Berlusconi's behaviour. Was he merely a mediator, or was he some kind of *dominus* of the cabinet, as some (e.g. O'Malley and Cavatorta 2004) have argued? If so, then was this true even in very difficult situations? Did he avoid conflict, or did he try to fight? Was he an arbitrator or an activist? If so, was he that way all the time or only when specific conditions permitted? These are the questions I intend to address.

Before analysing the subject in detail, let us set the politician Silvio Berlusconi in Italy's party and institutional context. To do this, we must first examine the political situation before his *discesa in campo*.

'A difficult democracy':⁴ the party system, governments and prime ministers of the First Republic

Between 1948, the year of the first general election based on universal suffrage, and 1992, the Italian party system had rather stable features. Its dynamics were mainly those described by Sartori (1966; [1976] 2005) using the term 'polarised pluralism'. Seven parties were important for government formation⁵ or were in a position to varying degrees to influence this process. One of them, the Christian Democratic party⁶ (Democrazia Cristiana, DC), occupied an unchanging position in the centre of the left–right spectrum (Hazan 2000) and was always part of the government. One of the system's main traits therefore was the lack of alternation and the peripheral turnover in government of minor parties around the pivotal position (Rémy 1975) occupied by the DC.

Most cabinets were staffed by coalitions, and all were post-electoral in the sense that their composition was decided only after the votes had been counted and election results were known. They were very unstable (Battezzozze 1987), unlike the political elite (Calise and Mannheim 1982; Mershon 2002), and were characterised by poor performance in terms of governance and policymaking (Di Palma 1977).

Prime ministers were symbols of this weakness. According to Calise (2007, 96), the Italian head of government in the First Republic was 'scarcely even *primus inter pares*, with the status of little more than a mediator among the parties (and factions) that comprised his government'. With the exception of Giovanni Spadolini of the Republican Party (Partito Repubblicano, PR) and Bettino Craxi of the Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI), in the 1980s, the premiership was always in the DC's hands, often in the hands of a faction leader. Rarely were prime ministers also party leaders. Spadolini and Craxi were both party leaders; but in the case of the DC, only two attempts were made to combine the offices, following the example of Alcide De Gasperi in the early years: by Fanfani in 1958, and by De Mita in 1988. They rapidly failed: both men faced strong resistance within the party because the factions were afraid of power concentrations. All prime ministers were selected by the parties after or between elections. Scholars have described Italian prime ministers of the First Republic as the 'creature[s] of party leaders' (Spotts and Wieser 1988, 117) and Italy as an 'acephalous republic' (Cavalli 1992, 237). Divisions inside the main party, and competition between factions, made the choice (even more) complicated.

Usually, party leaders did not enter the cabinet. This, together with the weakness of the heads of government, made cabinets dependent on parties (Cotta 1996), which shaped the final phases of the policymaking process and undermined government action (Cotta and Verzichelli 1996, 187–97).

In this article, I do not consider the entire cabinet decision-making process (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993; Vercesi 2012a), but, as I have said, only cases of conflict. During the First Republic, cabinet conflict management (Nousiainen 1993; Andeweg and Timmermans 2008) tended to be 'externalised'. Empirical studies (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000) have shown that both the most frequently used arenas, and those employed for the most serious conflicts, were either mixed (involving both government members and actors outside government) or external (many of the meetings being ad hoc and always bringing together the party leaders). A typical arena was the majority summit between prime

ministers (except in rare cases) and coalition party leaders and, depending on the case, other actors (Criscitiello 1993, 1996).

In the 1980s, when party leaders were more likely than before to join the cabinet, conflict management was situated much more inside it. This change was due to the creation of the *Consiglio di gabinetto* (cabinet council), an inner cabinet (Vercesi 2012a) consisting of Prime Minister Craxi and eight other government members.⁷

Italian governments and prime ministers after 1994: party-political changes

Between 1992 and 1994, Italy underwent a series of political upheavals that transformed the party system and initiated a process of transition to a Second Republic.⁸ The watershed event was the general election held on the basis of a new, mostly majoritarian, electoral system in 1994, the electoral system in force during the First Republic having been fully proportional.

Old parties disappeared, changed their identities or/and suffered divisions and splits⁹ – such as the one on the right of the DC, which changed its name to the Italian People's Party (Partito Popolare Italiano, PPI) and saw the breakaway of the Christian Democratic Centre (Centro Democratico Cristiano, CCD). These profound changes went hand in hand with the rise of the regionalist Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) and, on the centre right, the foundation by Silvio Berlusconi of his personal party (Calise 2000; McDonnell 2013), 'Go Italy!' (Forza Italia, FI).¹⁰

One of the most evident novelties of the Second Republic was the bipolar nature of party competition, which took place between two coalitions: one of the centre right, the other of the centre left.¹¹ Coalitions were now assembled before elections (Golder 2006) and stipulated pre-electoral coalition agreements (Moury and Timmermans 2008; Moury 2010, 2011). In contrast to the situation during the First Republic, all parties represented in Parliament were parties enjoying coalition potential (Sartori 2005).¹² The system was no longer blocked; alternation in government now became possible (Pritoni 2011).

The role of Prime Minister has certainly felt the effects of these changes. Heads of government have benefited from administrative strengthening (Criscitiello 2004) and, first and foremost, political strengthening proper. In 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2008, the pre-electoral nature of coalitions produced prime ministers who were also coalition leaders. They headed coalitions' election campaigns as natural candidates for the premiership and, when elected, could claim that their incumbency had been directly legitimated by the election outcomes themselves (Musella 2012). Moreover, the winning centre right coalition always had a leader, Berlusconi, who was the leader of the coalition's largest component (FI in 1994 and 2001; the PdL in 2008). Coalition leadership was less stable in the case of the more fragmented centre left, where party leaders alternated with more independent figures, such as Romano Prodi in 1996 and 2006.

A clear indicator of the increased power of prime ministers (Calise 2007) was, particularly with respect to Berlusconi, their greater room for manoeuvre in selecting ministers (though this freedom was counterbalanced by the fact that it remained somewhat difficult to dismiss ministers once appointed [Verzichelli 2009]).

As for political parties, they were weakened and party leaders decided, more frequently than before, to enter the cabinet. By appointing them as heads of important departments, prime ministers tried 'to maximise the prestige of the cabinet and the expectations of government durability' (Verzichelli 2009, 86). This actually has increased (Pritoni 2012).

We can now move to the analysis of Berlusconi as coalition leader and Prime Minister, focusing in particular on the process of conflict management. In this area, there is a serious lack of empirical research.¹³ At this point, however, it is important to clarify several aspects of the methodology of the investigation.

Research design and methodology

As noted, I have focused on the period of the Berlusconi II cabinet. It was not only the most durable cabinet/coalition among those headed by Berlusconi, but also the most enduring of the Second Republic (Table 1) and of the republican era. According to Pasquino (2007, 48), '[f]or most purposes, the analysis of Berlusconi the Prime Minister must be focused above all on his second government.'¹⁴

For the purposes of this study, I define a governing coalition as a group of political parties, in a legislature, that enjoys parliamentary confidence and staffs the executive. Each party must have at least one member in the cabinet (Council of Ministers) formally endorsed by the central body of the party. Those parties with only junior ministers or giving external support to the government are not coalition parties (see Boston and Bullock 2012). Secondly, I define a party as an organised group of individuals with a more or less formalised leadership (Müller 2000) that fields candidates as part of the same electoral list. When, after an election, two or more parties form, in at least one of the two chambers, a single parliamentary group (*Fraktion*) with its own distinctive identity and a specific name, they are to be considered as one party.

I present data that are useful for the purposes of testing the aforementioned hypotheses and which raise new theoretical questions (Mahoney 2007). They are derived from in-depth analysis of two major cases of inter-party conflict management in the coalition. In particular, I have taken into account two aspects of the process: participants and arenas (Vercesi 2012b). The conflicts have been selected from among those reported, during the life of the cabinet, on the front page¹⁵ of *La Stampa*, by checking all the issues published as part of the national edition.¹⁶ I chose *La Stampa* for this preliminary data collection exercise for several reasons. It is a newspaper sold throughout the country, with one of the highest circulations; it has no party affiliations; and it shows general and constant interest

Table 1. Italian cabinets since 1994.

Cabinet number	Cabinet	Date sworn in	Formal resignation	Duration (days)
1	Berlusconi	10 May 1994	22 December 1994	226
2	Dini	17 January 1995	11 January 1996	359
3	Prodi	18 May 1996	9 October 1998	874
4	D'Alema	21 October 1998	18 December 1999	423
5	D'Alema II	22 December 1999	19 April 2000	118
6	Amato II*	25 April 2000	31 May 2001	401
7	Berlusconi II	11 June 2001	20 April 2005	1409
8	Berlusconi III	23 April 2005	2 May 2006	374
9	Prodi II	17 May 2006	24 January 2008	617
10	Berlusconi IV	8 May 2008	12 November 2011	1284
11	Monti	16 November 2011	21 December 2012	402
12	Letta**	28 April 2013	–	–

* Amato also headed a cabinet from 1992 to 1993.

** In office at the time of writing.

in national politics. Most importantly, it is the only newspaper with a complete online archive. This makes it possible to locate the data without having to resort to keyword searches, which one is obliged to do with the archives of other major newspapers.¹⁷ Hence, I was able to check the newspaper's issues more quickly than I could have done by consulting the printed version, but with an equivalent degree of accuracy and reliability.

Having in this way chosen the two cases for analysis, details of the cases themselves were collated by reading all the relevant articles published in *Corriere della Sera*, the Italian newspaper without party affiliations that has the largest national circulation. The first case concerns a conflict about granting people from non-EU countries the right to vote in Italy's local elections; the second conflict concerns a potential tax cut. Berlusconi, as Prime Minister and/or as party leader, was involved in both of them. I have selected two inter-party policy conflicts because such conflicts are also the most threatening in coalition governments (Müller and Strøm 2000; Andeweg and Timmermans 2008).

Conflict management in the Berlusconi II cabinet: a heuristic case

The Berlusconi II cabinet comprised four parties. From the largest to the smallest, they were: FI (with more than 60% of the coalition seats); AN; the White Flower (Biancofiore) (from 2002, the Union of Christian Democrats of the Centre [Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro, UDC]); the LN. The general election of 2001 gave them ample majorities in both the lower and upper chambers. According to Diamanti and Lello (2005), coalition stability was based on two key factors: (1) FI's predominant strength; and (2) the 'northern axis' between the Prime Minister and the LN. Component parties signed a coalition agreement (besides agreeing to other programmatic documents) (Ricolfi 2006; Moury 2011).

As far as the composition of the cabinet is concerned, in June 2001 it was made up of 25 ministers, five of whom were without party affiliation. Ten were from FI; five from AN (whose leader was Deputy Prime Minister and, from 2004 onwards, Minister for Foreign Affairs); three from the LN; and two from the White Flower. Before December 2004, only one party leader (Marco Follini of the White Flower) remained outside the cabinet. Then he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. Bossi, the leader of the LN resigned as Minister for Institutional Reforms and Devolution in the summer of 2004 for health reasons and for a seat in the European Parliament.

Inter-party conflict management: the case of the right to vote¹⁸

Our first case of inter-party conflict management was a very short process, but the conflict involved was quite intense. It began in 2003, when AN leader Gianfranco Fini proposed that non-EU citizens be given the right to vote in local elections. The most strenuous opponent was the LN (see Avanza 2010; Albertazzi, McDonnell, and Newell 2011, 480–481).

Without alerting his own party in advance, Fini made the proposal during a conference of the National Council for the Economy and Labour (Consiglio nazionale dell'economia e del lavoro, CNEL)¹⁹ on 7 October. The reaction of the LN (through Bossi and other prominent party members) was explosive and included the threat to bring down the government and precipitate an early election. Follini, in contrast, supported Fini and left FI alone in its attempt to remain equidistant between the two sides. FI's deputy group leader in the Chamber remarked that the coalition had other priorities; one of the party's ministers, Claudio Scajola, mentioned the possibility of discussing the matter, and the

party's deputy coordinator, Fabrizio Cicchitto, demanded that the LN avoid 'tantrums beyond measure'. Fini in contrast asked Berlusconi to call the allies to order, 'one in particular' (*Corriere della Sera*, 8 October 2003, p. 5).

One day later and after an internal meeting of several leading members, AN decided to create a working group with the task of preparing a formal proposal to grant non-European citizens the right to vote after being Italian residents for 6–10 years. Berlusconi, on an official visit to Ukraine, moved closer towards the LN's position than his party colleagues had the previous day. He emphasised, as Bossi had already done, that the issue was neither part of the coalition agreement nor in the government's programme. However, he was ready to find a solution to the problem and keep the partners together. The message was clear: it was not possible to break up the coalition over an issue that was not part of the programme, and that was not urgent to boot.

Confirmation of the Berlusconi–Bossi axis strengthened the AN–UDC alliance as a reaction. According to Follini, the turn of events showed that the coalition lacked the effective prime-ministerial leadership it needed at the time. Meanwhile, Fini demanded freedom of action for issues outside the coalition agreement; on 9 October, Francesco Speroni, Bossi's departmental advisor, condemned this demand as 'very expedient and opportunistic' (*Corriere della Sera*, 10 October 2003, p. 2).

Tension between Berlusconi and Fini grew, though they sought to hide the fact from the public. The former was disappointed with the AN leader's decisions and called him that evening to communicate his displeasure. Fini's only answer was to criticise – during a news broadcast – the NL's suggestion of a cabinet crisis; to insist that the AN wanted to present a proposal to the legislature within eight days; to point out that there was an alternative parliamentary majority – comprising AN, the UDC, FI liberals and several members of the opposition – ready to vote for the proposal; and to highlight that other issues outside the programme had already been tackled.

Fini's strategy seemed to work. The following day, a conciliatory Prime Minister said that the coalition had to talk about the problem, although he also observed that his party was predominant and no cabinets other than the incumbent one were possible. The Deputy Prime Minister – along with the UDC – was both satisfied with this openness and inflexible in pursuing his goals. He sent positive signals to the LN about federal reforms (at that time, neither AN nor the UDC looked kindly upon them), but also asked Berlusconi to mediate and loosen the close prime-ministerial relationship with the LN.

As for Bossi, during a party rally on 11 October he announced that the LN planned to propose a referendum on the issue, whereas Roberto Castelli, a prominent LN member and Minister for Justice, confirmed the party's intention to vote against AN's proposal in Parliament. Berlusconi, for his part, had previously thought he could temper the situation by taking the subject to another level: the discussion of a possible common European immigration policy.

Up to that moment, the Prime Minister had aimed at less collective²⁰ management and strived to be the only point of contact between the parties in order to avoid being forced to choose unequivocally between support for one side as against the other. Whatever the case, the LN did not give up, and on 12 October again brought up the idea of toppling the cabinet. In retaliation, some of AN's senior members raised the possibility of keeping the majority alive even without the LN.

On 14 October, AN agreed the details of its proposal (see *Corriere della Sera*, 15 October 2003). The resulting conflict was radical,²¹ producing complete gridlock; Bossi was about to leave the cabinet, and wanted to force Berlusconi to choose between him and an alliance with Fini and Follini. In this situation, the Prime Minister's intervention was

decisive. Having telephoned him the previous day, Berlusconi called Bossi back on 15 October (while he was with one of the LN's prominent figures, Roberto Calderoli) and reassured the LN leader about their relationship and his commitment to federal reform. At the same time, he promised Fini that there was no coalition discipline on the proposal and that he could present it to Parliament without demanding collective agreement on the matter. Fini accepted and Bossi calmed down.

In sum, conflict management was very fragmented,²² but Berlusconi managed to exploit the small amount of 'wiggle room' provided by the extra-programmatic nature of the issue. He guided the coalition towards resolution of the conflict and, in particular, towards non-decision,²³ by mediating and taking the decision out of the coalition's hands: in other words, by bringing it into the parliamentary arena.²⁴ The cabinet was safe.

Inter-party conflict management: the case of the tax cut²⁵

The second case concerns a conflict that arose in late 2004 during preparation of the 2005 finance bill (De Giorgi and Verzichelli 2008). In this period, Bossi was already outside the cabinet and on the fringes of national political life because of the aforementioned health problems. In line with the coalition agreement, Berlusconi wanted to cut personal income tax. When the conflict exploded, he and his party aimed for three tax brackets – 23%, 33% and 39% – and wanted to put the reform into effect as of 2005. According to the head of government, the issue was a priority and the future of the cabinet depended on it.

On 21 September 2004, Berlusconi met the Minister of Finance, Domenico Siniscalco, in order to prepare the proposal. Two days later, the issue was considered at a meeting between Berlusconi, Follini and AN coordinator Ignazio La Russa, and at a meeting between Siniscalco and the FI, LN and UDC parliamentary leaders. Unlike FI, the other three parties strongly opposed Berlusconi's proposal to lower taxes without specific measures of support for families and businesses. Secondly, they questioned the financial soundness of the proposal. However, a low level of radicalisation characterised the conflict in its early phases.

Initial escalation of the conflict²⁶ was caused by a declaration of intent by Berlusconi. His goal was clear and he seemed not to miss a single opportunity to reaffirm it, standing firm in spite of his allies' doubts. In a letter published on the front page of *Corriere della Sera* on 3 October, he stated: this 'remains the top priority among the efforts of the Prime Minister, the Government and the majority, and the Treasury completely agrees' (*Corriere della Sera*, 3 October 2004, p. 1). On 7 October, AN expressed its concerns and the UDC again affirmed its intention to negotiate only if there were a discussion of benefits – demanded also by AN – for the poorest families and for the South. They did so while Berlusconi continued to meet with Siniscalco in order to achieve his original goal. In addition to the aforementioned demands, Fini proposed raising the 39% rate to 43%. Moreover, in spite of bilateral contacts between Siniscalco, Follini and the LN, the parties were far apart with respect to 'how' to cut taxes.

On 16 October, a few days before the holding of a majority summit, Fini and UDC leader Follini refused to step back from the idea of giving benefits, first and foremost, to the lower class. The LN, in turn, pushed for benefits for the middle class.²⁷ On 19 October, Fini raised his sights and proposed the introduction of a fourth tax rate for the highest incomes. Berlusconi made conciliatory gestures on 22 October, when, during an electoral meeting, he stated that, while he preferred a 39% tax rate, to meet AN's demands he was prepared to talk about a top rate of 42%. However, he still did not want more than three brackets and insisted that the timing of their introduction – early 2005 – was non-negotiable.

A majority summit was held on 26 October, but the participants did not find a solution: Berlusconi reverted to his original position of no rates above 40%; AN, in response, reiterated its demand for a fourth rate; the UDC decided to propose a tax cut for families through alternative methods rather than cutting income tax. The clash induced Berlusconi to announce that he was ready to resign if what had been an election promise could not be kept. Not even the second part of the summit (27 October) was sufficient to produce a de-escalation. As a result, another summit was scheduled seven days later.

The following day, during a meeting with Fini and the junior minister representing the Prime Minister's Office²⁸ and Berlusconi's close advisor Gianni Letta acting as mediator, the Prime Minister showed he was ready to accept a higher rate for larger incomes. In the evening of 29 October, immediately after a further escalation (see *Corriere della Sera*, 30 October 2004, p. 11), Berlusconi attended a dinner where Pierferdinando Casini (UDC), Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, acted as mediator, with Gianni Letta also attending. There was no solution yet, but on 1 November Calderoli stepped in and changed the situation. He illustrated to Berlusconi a proposal drawn up by members of the LN, AN and the UDC (Daniele Molgora, Maurizio Leo and Luca Volontè, respectively). At this point, the LN was in the running for the role of mediator. The plan envisaged three tax rates (23%, 33% and 39%) plus a temporary fourth rate for two years. After obtaining the Prime Minister's approval, Calderoli met with Siniscalco and two experts from the AN (Leo) and the UDC (Gianluigi Magri). On that day, Siniscalco also met with Fini and Follini.

On 4 November, Berlusconi met with LN representatives, and then called Fini and Follini to propose a reshuffle²⁹ (Ignazi 2005, 1067) in return for the possible tax cut. Furthermore, FI was ready to accept a temporary 42% rate. The substance of the conflict then shifted to a discussion of the availability of the necessary financial resources. The Prime Minister considered that the majority summit scheduled for 9 November would be 'decisive' (*Corriere della Sera*, 6 November 2004, p. 3).

In effect, that summit sealed an agreement. Both the tax cut issue and the reshuffle (implemented shortly thereafter) were discussed. The result was a compromise³⁰ in favour of Berlusconi's opponents. Indeed, while the Prime Minister achieved his reform, with respect to his initial goals he was forced to accept their postponement to 2006, and the fourth tax bracket. His allies also gained benefits for families and businesses. The FI leader yielded because of Siniscalco's insistence that there were insufficient financial resources to support the proposal and because of the resoluteness of his coalition partners.³¹

Discussion

At this point, we must discuss the findings and see whether Berlusconi was more predominant or 'equal' within the cabinet and his coalition(s), and examine the extent to which his role enabled him to shape coalition and government dynamics. In doing so, I will try to link the findings with what has already been said in the literature.

For purposes of the discussion, it is useful to refer to the theoretical distinction between *activists* and *arbitrators* (Blondel 1988). With regard to conflict management, an activist is a leading actor, as s/he steers the conflict through his/her actions. Indeed, through this behaviour, s/he may in turn be a source of strain. However, the stronger that person is, the more s/he will be able to force the situation and engineer outcomes agreeable to all parties. At the same time, s/he guarantees the survival of the coalition. In contrast, the impact of the latter, when s/he participates in the process, is limited at most to containing differences. Even when his/her party is one of the actors involved in the

conflict, s/he will not be a central figure. Often, his/her main goal is the avoidance of conflict. Berlusconi had to face important challenges to cabinet stability.³² How did he cope with them?

First and foremost, we should emphasise that he was, together with other party leaders, a crucial player in the process. With regard to the arenas, Berlusconi did not take management into more collective arenas (especially coalition committees [Andeweg and Timmermans 2008]), where the process tends to be more consensual, until the conflict had already become radicalised. And he succeeded in completely avoiding collective arenas when the conflict concerned a non-programmatic issue. Whatever the case, he was always the connecting element of the coalition and an inevitable player when it came to reaching an agreement and setting the agenda. With regard to the conflict on the right to vote, Berlusconi was the only ‘author’: when he proposed a solution, the conflict moved outside the coalition.

Moreover, he often used leadership of the largest party to impose his will (Barbieri 2001), as is testified to by his unwillingness to convene majority summits. It has been argued that

with regard to the defence of and the reference to specific aspects of the government programme, such as the tax cuts,... sometimes he attempted to plan a course of action closer to that of a head of government in a *single-party* cabinet, rather than behaving as a *broker* [*mediatore*]. (Circap 2005, 24; italics in original)

His dominant role inside his own party (Raniolo 2006; Mariotti 2011) helped him in this attempt. Furthermore, the fact that it was the largest coalition partner made him an almost irreplaceable figure; his allies were aware of that and knew that the chances of replacing his cabinet with another one were small. Some of their MPs displayed considerable loyalty to Berlusconi (Vassallo 2007, 709).

However, he was not a *dominus*. He was compelled to back away from conflict when room for the intra-coalitional manoeuvring ran out. This was clear especially when his allies refused to cooperate and opted for radical opposition leading to gridlock. At most, Berlusconi tried to be more than a coordinator and to propose and ‘defend’ alternative policies. When his allies acted as veto players (Tsebelis 2002), Berlusconi did not find it easy to manage conflict or search for agreement between the partners. Even the smallest parties were able to issue plausible threats to bring the cabinet down or, at least, to withdraw their compliance (see Schelling 1960), and they did this more than once.

In spite of the pay-offs paid to them in terms of public office such as ministerial posts, they... [went] well beyond an office-seeking approach and they... [exercised] a strong veto power on policies.... This, in the end,... put... [the] government under a double pressure: the rapacity of small parties for public office during the phase of government formation, resulting in their disproportionate formation weight; their veto power in the agenda setting and in the policy making of the government, resulting in an equally disproportionate coalition weight. (Conti 2010, 57)

It is not true that ‘Berlusconi seem[ed] to be able to act without restraint against his coalition partners and... to openly ignore their view on policies’ (O’Malley and Cavatorta 2004, 272). At least in the inter-party conflict management process, he was constrained by a given coalitional pattern.

The possibilities Berlusconi had successfully to impose his will or guide the cabinet towards a certain solution largely depended on his ‘cosy’ relationship with the LN.³³

In our first case study, he used his ‘friendship’ with LN leader, Bossi, and guaranteed the ‘northern axis’ as well as the federal reform. In the second, Bossi was not in the cabinet, and was almost out of political life all together. This implied that the Prime Minister, whose FI was one of the main parties to the conflict (see Boulding 1963), lacked the support of a very important ally in resisting the AN–UDC axis. As a matter of fact, as soon as Bossi regained his say and told his party to support the head of government, Berlusconi restarted the conflict, forced the issue and won (see note 31).

To sum up, ‘electoral legitimation’ gave Berlusconi an effective ‘surplus of political power’ (Pasquino 2005a, 324), and his firm party leadership enhanced this power. Nonetheless, this was subject to significant party-political constraints that reduced the effectiveness of the resources he was able to deploy during the process of conflict management. To put it briefly, ‘multiparty government limited the scope of personalisation, as *Forza Italia* shared the government with other partners’ (Blondel and Thiébault 2010, 185). This conclusion fits in with the idea expressed in the literature, according to which a plurality of roles of the kind Berlusconi fulfilled can certainly be a source of strength, but sometimes also a source of institutional weakness, particularly when it compels the holder, alone, to act at the ‘juncture’ between conflicting party demands and to cope with them (Campus and Pasquino 2006).

Regarding the distinction between activists and arbitrators, however, Berlusconi was closer to the former. Because of his leadership of FI, and because of its size, he wielded enough power to be a credible player when it came to achieving his own goals, even against his allies, particularly when he benefited from the support of one of them. He was able to act, if not in a coercive way, in a remunerative and/or persuasive one (Stoppino 2007). When the conflict became too difficult, his opportunities to be an activist decreased; but this does not mean that he was unable to assert his goals throughout the process.

Concluding remarks: Berlusconi in office. First above unequals?

The findings show us that, when it came to conflict management, during his premiership (s) Berlusconi affected both the arenas and the ‘path’ of the process. As long as he was not forced to use collective arenas (for example, by radicalising conflict), he avoided them and had recourse to many bilateral contacts. Secondly, he was close to the ideal-type (Weber 1949) activist – at least, when it came to managing an inter-party conflict. His power depended heavily on two very important political resources: leadership of the coalition, and leadership of his party. The two resources are not enough on their own. Berlusconi was a strong prime minister because he held the former and the latter, and because he held them while at the same time leading a pre-electoral coalition. The ‘direct legitimation’ this gave him enhanced the strengthening effects of the two types of leadership, in particular of the first type.

This conclusion seems to be in line with our knowledge of the strength of other Italian prime ministers. Berlusconi was stronger than they were because they lacked this combination. When – as in the case of Craxi (Barbieri 2001) – they had the latter resource, they did not have the former; when – as in the case of Prodi – they had the former, they did not have the latter. Prodi was the leader of a coalition, and was ‘directly’ legitimated; but because of the lack of the party resource, he encountered ‘great difficulties in guiding the coalition whose main stakeholder, Massimo D’Alema, and the minority stakeholder, Franco Marini, claimed a more high-profile role for the parties they led’ (Pasquino 2002, 162). And ‘as soon as Italy achieved entry to the Monetary Union the government fell apart with the

prime minister, who was without a large parliamentary backing, unable to control the actions of the parties in his government' (O'Malley and Cavatorta 2004, 280).

However, Berlusconi was not as powerful as his strongest colleagues, such as prime ministers in Westminster systems (Weller 1985; Strangio, t'Hart, and Walter 2013). He was weaker because, unlike them, he had to face coalitional constraints and the demands of his allies.

Further empirical investigations and new data would be needed in order to reinforce the findings. However, the qualitative approach and the in-depth analyses described above tell us something important about the role of Berlusconi as prime minister and coalition leader. His impact on coalition governance was remarkable, and specific party-political resources made him the strongest Italian prime minister to date. Nevertheless, the coalitional nature of governments matters; and this prevented him from achieving the freedom and the power of a fully fledged 'first above unequals' (Sartori 1994).

Acknowledgements

This article is the revised version of a paper presented at the conference, 'Silvio Berlusconi and Post-modern Politics', held at the University of Birmingham on 14 December 2012. Some initial findings were presented at the XXVI Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association, Rome, 13–15 September 2012. The support of the Centre for the Study of Democracy of the Leuphana University of Lüneburg and of the Department of Government of the University of Vienna is gratefully acknowledged as is the support of a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service. I thank Ferdinand Müller-Rommel and Wolfgang C. Müller for their valuable suggestions. I also wish to thank the participants of the conferences and the editors and two anonymous referees of *Contemporary Italian Politics* for their useful comments on the first version of this article.

Notes

1. Even though the term 'Second Republic' may sound strange (bearing in mind that the regime to which it refers seems to be about to turn into something new without itself having fully come into being), the alternative term, 'transition', seems to be conceptually even more problematic (Bull and Newell 2009; Bull 2012).
2. In the summer of 2013, Berlusconi announced that he wanted to establish a new edition of Forza Italia (see below) in the context of coalition that would be called Popolo della Libertà ('Ritorno alle origini (con nuovi alleati). Forza Italia 2.0, uno scudo per il Cavaliere,' *Corriere della Sera*, 29 June 2013).
3. Here, I define the strength of a prime minister in a narrow sense, and in behavioural terms, as his or her ability to reach decisions within the coalition and make his or her position that of the coalition as a whole.
4. The expression is that of Spotts and Wieser (1988).
5. On government formation, see Laver (1998); Vercesi (2012c, 234–47).
6. This party always won a relative majority of seats. In 1948 it obtained an absolute majority, but was denied it in the Senate (the upper chamber) thanks to the third transitory provision of the Constitution. By providing for the appointment as senators, for the duration of the first legislature, of those who had – among other criteria – been dismissed in 1926 by the Fascist regime when the Senate of the Kingdom of Italy was dissolved, it resulted in the appointment of 106 senators, for the most part from outside the DC.
7. And, sometimes, ministers by invitation. This arena was kept alive but lost importance during the second phase of the subsequent Goria premiership and was formalised in 1988 by the De Mita cabinet (1988–89) by means of Law No. 400 (see Criscitiello 1994; Barbieri 2001, 199–201).
8. Though without major changes in the institutional landscape.
9. For details, see Newell (2000).

10. FI, the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN, the former post-Fascist Italian Social Movement [Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI] which committed itself to a process of moderation in the first half of the 1990s) and a number of other very small parties contested the election of 2008 under the unitary symbol of the PdL. Official merger followed in 2009.
11. Notwithstanding the attempts of some parties to stay out of them and the new developments produced by the general elections of 2008 and 2013.
12. In the First Republic, the two relevant extremist parties – on the left, the Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) and, on the right, the MSI – were excluded ‘almost by definition’ (Sartori 2005, 122) from cabinets because of their nature as anti-system parties, meaning parties that, if they could, would change not only the incumbent government, but the whole political regime. It is worth noting that the Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI) too was an anti-system party until 1956, when it broke its alliance with international Communism.
13. Regarding the Berlusconi I cabinet (1994), we know that it often resorted to majority summits (Criscitiello 1996). General information about the prime ministerial role since 2001 may be found in the annual reports of government activity of the Centre for the Study of Political Change (CIRCaP) of the University of Siena (www.circap.unisi.it/publications/government-report).
14. Here, I use the terms ‘cabinet’ and ‘government’ interchangeably. According to my criteria, there is a change of cabinet when there is: (1) a change of prime minister; (2) a change of party composition; and/or (3) a new general election (Müller and Strøm 2000; Müller-Rommel 2001; Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2008). A discussion of the point is in Laver and Schofield (1990, 145–147); Laver (2003, 25–27); Damgaard (2008, 302–303).
15. I have excluded editorials. The assumption is that conflicts reported on the front page are the most dangerous and hence the most important. Needless to say, exceptional or very important events, e.g. certain international crises, might temporarily ‘obscure’ domestic news relegating them to other pages. With this caveat, I think my chosen procedure remains a reliable way of capturing major intra-party and intra-coalition conflicts.
16. In the period taken into account, there were 29 occasions on which *La Stampa* was not published. Moreover, one issue could not be consulted online.
17. For example, dealing with similar data but referring to German politics, Miller and Müller (2010) adopt a similar approach.
18. I found the relevant *Corriere della Sera* articles by searching by topic in the archive of the ‘press review’ section on the website of the Chamber of Deputies (<http://rassegna.camera.it>) taking the period from 1 to 31 October 2003 and using the search terms, ‘Prima pagina’ (front page); ‘Affari costituzionali’ (Constitutional affairs); ‘Politica interna’ (domestic politics).
19. The CNEL is a body that advises Parliament and the government, and gives opinions, makes observations and submits legislative proposals on various issues, such as economic policy, welfare and labour policy.
20. On the notion of collective decision-making, see Andeweg (1993).
21. On the radicalisation of conflicts, see Nevola (1994).
22. See Vercesi (2012a) for the notion of fragmented decision-making.
23. On the meaning of non-decisions, see Vercesi (2012b).
24. On the parliamentary arena, see Döring (1995); Strøm, Müller and Smith (2010).
25. Once more, for this research I used the archive of the website of the Chamber of Deputies (see above). The period is 1 September to 30 November 2004. The search terms are ‘Prima pagina’ (front page); ‘Bilancio dello Stato e legge Finanziaria’ (state budget and finance bill) and ‘Politica economica in generale’ (general economic policy), both in ‘Bilancio, tesoro e programmazione’ (budget, treasury and planning); ‘Sistema fiscale e tributario’ (fiscal and tax system) and ‘Ipotesi di riforma’ (potential reforms), both in ‘Finanza’ (finance); ‘Attività del governo’ (government activity) and ‘Partiti, movimenti e raggruppamenti politici’ (parties, movements and political groups), in ‘Politica interna’ (domestic politics).
26. See Arielli and Scotto (2003) on conflict escalation.
27. According to the party, people earning between €15,000 and €30,000 per annum.
28. This is a central figure of Italian governments. See, for example, Cassese (1980, 187); Cotta (1997, 147); Barbieri (2003, 146).
29. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs would go to Fini and, in compensation, the deputy premier-ship would go to Follini. At that time, the Minister for Foreign Affairs was Franco Frattini

- (FI). He later became European Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security in the first Barroso Commission. On cabinet reshuffles, see Indriðason and Kam (2008).
30. On compromise as a possible outcome of inter-party conflict management, see Vercesi (2012b).
 31. A couple of days later, a very similar conflict exploded again. Berlusconi was not satisfied and decided to raise the problem once more. This time, Bossi placed the LN on his side against the allies. Berlusconi was harsher on partners and ‘won’ the conflict (together with the LN): the coalition agreed to implement the reform in 2005.
 32. Laver (2003); Vercesi (2012c, 253–263) on cabinet stability.
 33. The LN constantly supported Berlusconi against his other allies on policy matters. In using this opposition, Berlusconi gave the LN ‘free rein to make controversial, and even offensive, statements’. Bossi could ‘respect the LN’s populist regionalist ‘outsider’ identity while also appearing to have the PM’s ear and, with it, influence over government policy’ (Albertazzi, McDonnell, and Newell 2011, 478; see also Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005).

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