

Opinion **Italian election**

## Five Star struggles to be Italy's agent of change

The party lacks any cohesive team that looks like a credible government in waiting

**BILL EMMOTT**



Five Star Movement's Beppe Grillo, left, and Luigi Di Maio: the party is backed by nearly 30 per cent of the electorate but needs 40 per cent to form a government © AFP

Bill Emmott FEBRUARY 8, 2018

It is a sign of [Silvio Berlusconi's](#) Trump-like talent that the wily 81-year-old has got everyone talking about him in the campaign for [Italy's](#) general election on March 4, even when his party is running a distant third in the [polls](#). The party that should really be the centre of attention is the frontrunner, the [Five Star Movement](#). For it, not Mr Berlusconi, is both the country's true hope and its greatest despair.

Five years ago, when Italy held its last general election, two forces emerged proposing radical change, both from outside the mainstream. One was the young mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, who a year later stabbed his Democratic party colleague, Enrico Letta, in the back and took over as prime minister despite never having been elected to national office. The other was Five Star, which grabbed more than 25 per cent of the votes despite having been born only four years earlier and being led by a comedian, Beppe Grillo, who wasn't even running for parliament.

Mr Renzi, like Nicolas Sarkozy when he was elected French president in 2007, promised a rupture with the old ways of politics that he struggled to deliver. After less than three years in office he crashed and burnt, losing a referendum on constitutional change on which he had unwisely bet his future.

With Mr Renzi's centre-left Democratic party split and slipping in the polls, 11 per cent of the workforce unemployed, youth unemployment stuck at nearly 33 per cent and economic growth under-performing the rest of the eurozone, the way should now be clear for the other reforming force to sweep into power.

If Mr Renzi resembles Mr Sarkozy, the party the Five Star Movement resembles most is Emmanuel Macron's [La République en Marche](#). It too draws support and membership from both left and

right, young and old and, crucially for Italy, north and south. Like En Marche, its activists and voters are mainly middle class. Now it has dropped Mr Grillo's former insistence on an (unconstitutional) referendum on Italy's euro membership, it even looks potentially constructive in European terms.

**Burdened by a public debt of over 130 per cent of GDP, inherited from the profligate 1980s but worsened by economic stagnation over the past 20 years, the country went backwards during the time Mr Berlusconi served as prime minister**

Moreover, let there be no doubt: [Italy needs change](#). Burdened by a public debt of over 130 per cent of gross domestic product, inherited from the profligate 1980s but worsened by economic stagnation over the past 20 years, the country went backwards during the eight years Mr Berlusconi served as prime minister in 2001-06 and 2008-11. The old vice of corruption revived, the justice system worsened and no significant reforms were even attempted by his governments.

Five Star is the party that should be offering a new future, and the nearly 30 per cent of the electorate backing it are surely hoping for one. The trouble is it needs 40 per cent to form a government. The reason

it does not look like getting it is that although it is Italy's En Marche, it lacks a Macron.

It is not just a matter of a person, although Five Star's 31-year-old candidate for the prime ministership, Luigi Di Maio, plainly lacks Mr Macron's experience, expertise and savoir faire, and is being populist on the issue of trans-Mediterranean migration, putting off centrist voters. It is that the party lacks any cohesive team that looks like a credible government in waiting. This is the fault of Mr Grillo and his insistence on running the party through a fake online democracy, with candidates chosen by handfuls of voters.

With less than four weeks to go, there is scarcely time to make up for this. Announcing a potential cabinet, including a candidate for the crucial post of finance minister, could help. If the only viable government after March 4 proves to be a grand coalition for which Mr Berlusconi acts as kingmaker, Five Star will have just itself to blame. It will have failed its change-hungry voters and it will have failed Italy.

*The writer is author of 'The Fate of the West'*

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The Italian coalition job

An alliance has long been the 'base case scenario' of the March election

Grand coalitions aren't just a German thing. An alliance between Matteo Renzi's centre-left Democratic party (PD) and Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia party has long been the "base case scenario" — the most likely outcome — of the Italian election looming on March 4.

Many politicians in Rome have also been operating under the assumption that a hung

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### Italy politics

## Berlusconi hardens immigration stance after weekend shooting

Forza Italia leader shifts further right on issue after attack on African migrants



Paramedics treat a shooting victim in Macerata © EPA

[Silvio Berlusconi](#), the former Italian prime minister and media mogul, hardened his stance on immigration ahead of next month's general election after a [neo-Nazi](#) attack on African migrants in Macerata convulsed the heated campaign.

Mr Berlusconi, the 81-year-old leader of the centre-right alliance topping opinion polls, said of the 600,000 migrants who had arrived on Italian soil in recent years that only a small fraction were refugees and the rest were a "social bomb that is ready to explode".

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**The Big Read Silvio Berlusconi****Italian election: the resurrection of 'Saint' Silvio Berlusconi**

The former prime minister has recast himself as a pro-EU elder statesman and an alternative to Five Star's populism

With his perfectly dyed dark hair and his ivory-white teeth glistening in the lights of the television studio, [Silvio Berlusconi](#) — the octogenarian comeback kid of Italian politics — was reminiscing last month about his first election campaign.

It was 1948, he was 12 years old, and the young Silvio was putting up posters for the centre-right Christian Democratic party in its ultimately victorious confrontation with the Italian Communist party. There was one image that forever stuck in his mind.

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**Opinion Italian election****Italy's political threat to the EU and to investors**

Markets are too complacent about the parliamentary election next month

**WOLFGANG MÜNCHAU**



Luigi Di Maio of the Five Star Movement © AP

The financial markets never quite got the eurozone right. Investors often panicked when they should not have done, as they did again ahead of last year's French elections. Responding to the German elections, on the other hand, they were too apathetic.

Most outside observers lost interest when they realised that Angela Merkel would probably emerge as chancellor once again. Now the markets are complacent about the [Italian elections](#), scheduled for March 4. The consensus is that the election will produce

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### Italian election

## Berlusconi travels to Brussels in bid to seal political comeback

Former PM's centre-right coalition leads the polls ahead of Italy's March 4 election



Silvio Berlusconi: 'Italians are a wise and mature people, who know very well how to make responsible choices, without Brussels' guardianship' © Reuters

At the height of the eurozone debt crisis in 2011, German chancellor Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, the then French president, famously looked at each other and smirked when asked if they had been “reassured” by Silvio Berlusconi.

A few days later Mr Berlusconi resigned dramatically as Italian prime minister as the country's bond yields surged, ostensibly ending the media mogul's two decade long

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### Italian election

## Italy's Five Star leader faces credibility test as election looms

Eurosceptic candidate's belief in his own party's policies questioned



Eurosceptic Luigi Di Maio, left, heads the group that has become the strongest single party heading into the election © AFP

Dario De Falco, a mental health counsellor in the gritty industrial town of Pomigliano in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, easily remembers the first political battle fought by Luigi Di Maio, then his high school friend and now bidding to run Italy.

It was in 2002. A teacher and 27 children had died when a primary school in nearby Molise crumbled following an earthquake and the tragedy triggered fears about their own decrepit school.

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### Italian election

## Macron has warm words for Gentiloni as Italian poll looms

French president close to endorsing pro-EU ruling party over Eurosceptic rivals



Emmanuel Macron, left, and Paolo Gentiloni in Rome on Thursday © AP

Emmanuel Macron came close to endorsing [Italy](#)'s ruling centre-left Democratic party, and incumbent prime minister Paolo Gentiloni, on Thursday, ahead of a tricky Italian election that could see a surge in support for the Eurosceptic opposition.

On a visit to Rome on Thursday, the French president said that with Italy set for a parliamentary vote in March, he wanted to “underline what a pleasure” it had been to

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