

## **Berlusconism: Some Empirical Research**

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*Abstract: This paper investigates the particular nature of Berlusconi's power, choosing as the main variable the structure of his parties, Forza Italia and the People of Freedom. The aim of the research is to understand how Berlusconi succeeded in imposing a position of incontestable power over his party and among his followers in Parliament, and the reasons for the current crisis in his system of power. On the methodological plane, the paper is based on the analysis of party statutes, official documents, speeches and, above all, face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted with fifty members of Parliament.*

**Keywords:** Berlusconi's parties, party organisations, parliamentary class, personalisation of politics.

The aim of this article is to analyse Silvio Berlusconi's party organisations, not only from an objective point of view, but, above all, at the subjective level, trying to reconstruct both Berlusconi's own vision of the parties he established, and the perception that his parties' ruling classes themselves had of these organisations. By considering the problems thrown up by the birth of the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL) - within which Berlusconi was not able to exercise the same dominance he had enjoyed within Forza Italia (FI) being compelled, consequently, to force the recent schism in the party - we hope to provide instruments to assist an understanding of the current crisis of 'Berlusconism' in Italian politics.

In order to contextualise the research we begin with an historical overview of the events which, from 1994, allowed the emergence and consolidation of Berlusconism and which, most recently, seem to denote its crisis and possible demise. The central part of the research explores - through analysis of the various statutes that have succeeded one another in FI and the PdL, as well as analysis of Berlusconi's speeches and of the few official documents produced by his parties - the model of party imagined and pursued by the entrepreneur. Secondly, I examine how FI members of Parliament view their party's characteristics and their relationship with the leader. The material contained in this part of the article is the fruit of research concerning FI developed through face-to-face, in-depth interviews

with fifty members of the Italian Parliament during the fifteenth legislature, all belonging to Berlusconi's party.

The recent crisis of the PdL has brought about a real earthquake in Italian politics, resulting in a series of events which have seemed to destabilise the Berlusconi system of power. This article tries to identify some of the critical factors lying at the root of this crisis.

### **Historical overview**

FI represented a true novelty both in Italian politics and on the international political scene. Founded officially on 18 January 1994,<sup>1</sup> it was from the start intended to be just the opposite of the traditional mass party. A slim structure, based on the strength of the leader (Silvio Berlusconi), and a corporate mindset akin to that of Fininvest (Berlusconi's corporation, which provided the organisational resources essential to the establishment and consolidation of FI), are among the main features making this party different from all types and classes of party identified by political analysts up to then (Duverger, 1951). It is no accident that most of the senior officials of the new party-movement<sup>2</sup> came from Fininvest (Lanza and Piazza 2002) or were close to Berlusconi's companies. The party founded by Berlusconi was the first attempt in Europe to establish a political organisation based on a private commercial enterprise, and for this reason it was for long referred to as a '*partito-azienda*' (or '*corporate party*').

The electoral success of 1994 – which led Berlusconi to become Prime Minister – and the subsequent failure of the strategy of alliances (particularly with the Northern League) – which led to the Government's downfall and put FI in opposition – forced a rethink and reorganisation of the structure of the party-movement. A new Statute, promoted by national coordinator, Cesare Previti, provided a more structured organisation at the local level, though FI continued to have a slim structure with a concentration of powers and functions at the top of the party, in the hands of its president, Berlusconi.

The 1996 general election defeat marked the failure of Previti's '*adherents' party*' model, which had been unable either to reduce the internal democratic deficit (a goal lukewarmly pursued, not being considered a priority by the leader himself), or to create a structure which could support the leader in the selection of a political class at the national or local level. Berlusconi therefore entrusted the new national coordinator, Claudio Scajola, with the task of rewriting the Statute in order to give the party a more solid organisation. With this new Statute (January 1997), FI maintained two features of the original model: personalisation of the leadership and an elections-oriented strategy.

Between 1996 and 2001, years in which the party remained in opposition, all FI's members of Parliament were given a role inside the

party with the result that many of the new structures of the party were the work of these 'parliamentarian officials', able to profit from being in opposition. When in 2001 FI was again victorious at a general election, almost everybody who had a significant role in the party was called upon to assume a governmental position of some sort. As a consequence, thanks to substantial overlap between the party's officials and the parliamentary class, the process of party institutionalisation 'froze'.

In 2006, Berlusconi's coalition lost the general election by a handful of votes, and began a period of very strenuous opposition to the weak coalition, led by Romano Prodi, that then took office. As in previous periods of opposition, Berlusconi dedicated himself to the party. A phase of thoroughgoing change was initiated through two strategies: on the one hand, Sandro Bondi, new national coordinator (nominated at FI's second Congress, in 2004, with Fabrizio Cicchitto as his deputy), ran a membership campaign and promoted the organisation of several local conventions; on the other hand, Michela Vittoria Brambilla - a new face in the party and openly supported by Berlusconi himself - managed the *Circoli della Libertà* (Freedom Associations), which aimed to be a movement not formally bound to FI, but inspired and directly tied to Berlusconi.

In a decisive moment for Italian politics, Berlusconi chose to exploit this initiative for the creation of a new political organisation, the PdL. The PdL's birth could be considered the realisation of a project conceived a long time previously by Berlusconi.

At first we were a party concerned almost exclusively with the administration of justice. Then we gradually took over the space occupied by the old *pentapartito* (five-party coalition). Then, when we joined the European People's Party, there was a further change. Now we are getting ready to establish the Party of Freedom and this is possible precisely because everything is encapsulated by the leader. [...] The construction, on the right, of a liberal democratic party has been Berlusconi's aim ever since 1994 (Member of Parliament, March 2007).

What in newspapers was called the 'running board revolution'<sup>3</sup> was not a sudden action by a leader looking for the attention of the media, but a long-studied plan worked out by Berlusconi in every detail.

Now it is important to give life to this new creature, which will be the champion of freedom and democracy in the coming decades [...] we will be pleased to be able to find for our country a direction of change that assures democracy, freedom [...] the party of the people of freedom, the People of Freedom (from Berlusconi's 'running board speech', Milan, 18 November 2007).

Berlusconi himself had announced his desire to create the new party on 2 December 2006 in piazza San Giovanni in Rome:

We are here to send the Prodi government packing. We are here to prevent the left from impoverishing Italy materially and morally. We are here to look to the future of a great new party of freedom. We are the people of freedom, we believe in a dream, in a prospect that can be guaranteed only with the realisation of our liberal programme founded upon our values of freedom. They are ours because they do not belong to a single party; ours because together we all believe in them; ours because all of us together want to change this country, to resume the journey towards reform and growth. Here, today, we are the united party of the centre right, we are already the party of freedom. (Berlusconi's speech, Rome, December 2, 2006).

The PdL was constituted as a federation of political parties on 27 February 2008, the founding conference being held at the Fiera di Roma on 29 March 2009. The PdL – defined as a ‘movement’ by Berlusconi, one that did not have the word ‘party’ in its name, so stressing semantically and symbolically the distance from the old traditional parties – brought together the main political forces of the centre right: FI, the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), la Destra and other minor groups of Christian Democratic, liberal, social-democratic, centrist and right-wing inspiration. At the beginning of the sixteenth legislature they formed a single parliamentary group. The PdL won the general election of 2008, taking over the government of the country with a solid parliamentary majority. Nonetheless, despite the huge support obtained in the 2008 ballot, today there are several questions and doubts hanging over the future of this party and – above all – of the government it sustains.

Even if, formally, the charismatic nature of the leadership of the PdL seemed even more in evidence than in the case of FI, in reality concerns were soon voiced about the activities of internal factions, considered the ‘heritage of the ex-AN members’,<sup>4</sup> which were affecting the relationship between the leader and the organisation. The debate on internal groups highlighted the difficult cohabitation between Gianfranco Fini – former leader of AN, co-founder of the PdL and President of the Chamber of Deputies – and Berlusconi; and it brought ex-FI members out of their state of former isolation, thanks to their fear of this new reality which appeared to be making ground within the party. On 27 January 2010, Sandro Bondi, one of the three national coordinators, initiated a debate through the pages of *Il Giornale*, in which he expressed his concerns about a possible consolidation of these internal groups, and about the risk that they could undermine Berlusconi's vision as it had been embodied in FI.

My concern, however, is that there are positions, some within our party, which are incompatible with the reasons for which President Silvio Berlusconi established Forza Italia and then the People of Freedom. [...] It would be a mistake and a curious paradox if, at the peak of its political power and of the widespread support it enjoys in the country, a certain

political nomenclatura felt enabled to go it alone, to lay claim to a degree of autonomy that would cast a shadow over the future (Sandro Bondi, *Il Giornale*, 27 January 2010).

The debate continued with the interventions of various MPs (mostly former FI members), among whom the ex-national coordinator, Fabrizio Cicchitto, threatened AN dissidents with the creation of a huge internal group of ex-FI members ready to fight them. Meanwhile, Claudio Scajola declared himself to be against internal groups, but in favour of a party which 'allows Berlusconi's charismatic leadership to coexist with an organisation of members, rooted in the territory and open to the lively contributions of voters' (*Il Giornale*, February 5, 2010). The emergence of internal factions made it clear that Berlusconi's control of the party was not as unassailable as his control of FI had been.

The regional elections of March 2010 marked the beginning of the clash between Fini and Berlusconi that would eventually lead to their political divorce. Fini's decision not to participate in the election campaign, out of respect for his position as President of the Chamber of Deputies, was taken badly by Berlusconi, who was also quite irritated by the decision to launch - on 1 April 2010 - the new association *Generazione Italia*, tied directly to Fini and presided over by his right-hand man, Italo Bocchino. *Generazione Italia* was born with the intended aim of contributing 'to the growth of the governing class which is going to change our country in the next ten years, making its institutions better, meritocratic and more competitive'.<sup>5</sup> The association sought to clarify its relationship with the PdL, seen as the best political vehicle for the achievement of its objectives, by declining to question Berlusconi's leadership, while seeking to work as a 'bridge' between the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the PdL. Its position was, it declared,

to support the leadership of Berlusconi combined with the role of Fini; to support the very close relationship with the League, while seeking the appropriate counterweight to the sometimes extreme positions typical of a party rooted in a strong sense of territorial identity; to support the PdL and the coordinators who lead it while asking for more opportunities for participation and a greater appreciation of internal diversity.

In spite of *Generazione Italia*'s protestations of loyalty to Berlusconi, very soon the desire to establish a presence on the ground emerged, through a membership campaign and the creation of local offices throughout Italy. Moreover, Fini's association began immediately to recruit inside the PdL itself, with the campaign '*Io sto con Fini*' ('I'm with Fini'), enabling elected officials to declare their adherence to the faction, which grew stronger in the party. On 22 April 2010, Berlusconi reacted by calling a meeting of the party's national executive committee during which he became embroiled in

an open conflict with Fini, a conflict that was broadcast publicly, as a result of which division between the two leaders was revealed to be insurmountable. The committee, in the end, passed a resolution confirming its unswerving loyalty to Berlusconi and his government.

The Direzione Nazionale of the People of Freedom therefore endorses the political conclusions reached by President Silvio Berlusconi and confirms its full support for and its deep gratitude towards him (from the final communiqué of the Direzione Nazionale, 22 April 2010, [www.ilpopolodellaliberta.it/notizie/arc\\_17886.htm](http://www.ilpopolodellaliberta.it/notizie/arc_17886.htm)).

The relationship between the two co-founders of the PdL deteriorated to the extent that it led, on 29 July 2010, to the expulsion of Fini, to the referral of some of his followers to the party's internal adjudicators (*probiviri*),<sup>6</sup> and to a statement produced by the Office of the Presidency of the PdL:

The President's office considers the positions of the Honourable Fini to be completely at odds with the founding principles of the People of Freedom, with the undertakings given to the electorate and with the political strategy of the party. As a consequence, the PdL has also lost confidence in the impartiality of the President of the Chamber of Deputies chosen by the majority that won the general election ([www.ilpopolodellaliberta.it/notizie/18598/ufficio-di-presidenza-testo-integrale-del-documento](http://www.ilpopolodellaliberta.it/notizie/18598/ufficio-di-presidenza-testo-integrale-del-documento)).

As a result, the President of the Chamber immediately created new parliamentary groups in both the Chamber and the Senate: Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia (FLI), which in October 2010 numbered 35 deputies and 10 senators.

The political baptism of the new group took place between 31 August and 5 September at Mirabello, the traditional location of the annual meetings of the old AN. The creation of a new party, at that time, seemed unavoidable. On 29 September Fini announced the convocation, for 5 October, of the parliamentary groups of FLI to create an organising committee for the new political body. The first step was the drafting of a manifesto for the fledgling FLI, presented to the First National Convention of Generazione Italia on 6 and 7 November 2010, in Perugia, in anticipation of the Constituent Assembly of the party, which was held in Milan from 11 to 13 February 2011.

The future of the government soon came to be perceived as in jeopardy. Fini's new group initially confirmed its support for the government, but later, in October 2010, asked Berlusconi to resign and to form a new centre-right government which would include the Union of the Centre (Unione di Centro, UdC) as well. If not, FLI government members would – as they actually did – resign. Berlusconi tried to resist, but early elections seemed a concrete possibility.

However, the government was not the only important entity that appeared to be in jeopardy. The PdL was now once again firmly under the control of its president, but Fini's departure enabled those unwilling to tie their political fortunes entirely to those of the leader, to leave the party, while also inducing the MPs formerly belonging to FI to develop new networks between themselves. It is particularly significant, in this regard, that several associations were founded, including ones led by former FI and former AN members working together. Berlusconi, realising the risk he was running, chose to stand firmly against this phenomenon, leading him to make public statements opposing even *Liberamente*, the organisation created by his most faithful lieutenants. During the very founding conference of the organisation Berlusconi intervened by telephone declaring:

Unfortunately we are attempting to damage ourselves in our own backyard; let us try to avoid it. I do not believe that we should open the door to factions, but that we should remain united, as we have always been ([www.unionesarda.it/Articoli/Articolo/185172](http://www.unionesarda.it/Articoli/Articolo/185172)).

Some of the very founders of *Liberamente*, such as the Minister of Justice, Angelino Alfano, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini, and the national coordinator of the PdL, Sandro Bondi, were thus induced to desert the public events and conferences organised by their own association in order to avoid upsetting the Premier.

The future of the PdL at this time appeared very uncertain, suspended between a party model founded on charismatic leadership (like FI) and something else, to which Berlusconi was strongly opposed anyway. That is why, on 11 October 2010, Berlusconi announced that he was willing to create, probably in January, a new party.

I want a more Berlusconi PdL. And I want a real party, with new local leaders, eliminating every residual enclave of support for Fini to be found in the localities (*La Repubblica*, 11 October 2010).

In spite of the apparent victory of Berlusconi – who has maintained his parliamentary majority with great difficulty – the break with Fini has dealt a very heavy blow to the leader's image. For the first time, the unquestioned power of Berlusconi over his party and the Government has faltered, and the trust of MPs and voters has been severely shaken. Berlusconi seems to be able to withstand the continuous opposition attacks, but the real problem is within his party. Parliamentarians from FI and AN want to be reassured by their leader and they want him to satisfy their increasing requests. This is the reason why Berlusconi recently announced that he would not run as a candidate for the premiership at the next general election, and why he has appointed a new single national coordinator of

the party, his most faithful collaborator, the (resigning) Minister of Justice, Angelino Alfano.

### **Berlusconi's party in political science**

Reviewing carefully the political science literature on FI, it emerges that Berlusconi's party has been the object of several definitions during the fifteen years of its life. At the beginning it was considered a 'flash party', because of its sudden and unexpected appearance on the political scene, and also because of the absence of structures characteristic of traditional mass parties. FI in 1994 was considered to be an absolutely temporary phenomenon – a weak and evanescent political group lasting just for a legislature – one destined to disappear shortly afterwards without affecting the Italian political system, similarly to the post-World War II experience of L'Uomo Qualunque.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the scepticism of experts and analysts, in March 1994 Berlusconi's party won the elections, taking over the government of the country. This compelled political observers to re-evaluate Berlusconi's project, which, nonetheless, kept on being underestimated. In fact, thanks also to the fragility which manifested itself at the end of 1994 (particularly with the failure in the local elections of November) FI was still considered a 'virtual party' (McCarthy, 1995), a 'ghost party' (Bobbio, 1994), a 'personal patrimonial party' (Maraffi, 1995).

The definition that then deemed most appropriate was 'corporate party', as we have seen, with Berlusconi relying exclusively on his companies, particularly Publitalia '80 run by Marcello Dell'Utri, for the design and management of election campaigns and the selection of election candidates.<sup>8</sup>

Publitalia did not contribute to Forza Italia's election campaign, it ran that campaign and created from nothing Italy's largest political party (Marcello Dell'Utri, in an interview during the annual convention of Publitalia in Montecarlo, September 1994).

This is the reason why, for a long time, the label of 'corporate party' remained in vogue.

What escaped analysts' attention was that Fininvest in particular was not a corporation like any other, but was characterised by a total 'Berlusconi-shaped mindset', with an evident absence of rules and established roles. There were no permanent appointments (or at least there were very few), and everyone in Fininvest had to be elastic enough to follow the President in all of his ideas, reshaping continuously tasks and responsibilities. It means that FI was not to be managed following a classic corporate model, but that both Berlusconi's companies and the party were



to be run in a totally novel way, reflecting in every aspect the personality of the leader.

Among the most convincing definitions to have been used in these years to describe FI, are: the 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer, 1966), given the heterogeneousness of its programmes and the generality of its references to values; 'populist party' (Meny and Surel, 2001), capturing the continuous appeal to the people, considered by Berlusconi to be the only source of legitimacy for the exercise of political power (Mariotti, 2008; 2010); 'electoralist party' (Panebianco, 1982; Gunther and Diamond, 2002; Lanza and Piazza, 2002), considering the exclusive role of the party to be that of supporting its leader's political ambitions, and 'charismatic party' (Panebianco, 1982; Raniolo, 2000; Poli, 2001). This last definition perhaps captures the essence of the party better than any other: charisma implies recognition of the leader's exceptional qualities by the people in the group, and – as emerges from our interviews with parliamentarians – there is no doubt that FI members of Parliament consider themselves as the spokespersons of such a party (see below).

### **The party from a subjective point of view**

In order to understand the nature of FI and the PdL we need to know not only how they have been studied so far as objective phenomena, but also how they have been subjectively perceived by their leader and – above all – by their ruling classes.

#### *Berlusconi's parties as conceived by Berlusconi himself*

Through a careful study of the Statutes adopted at various times by FI and the PdL, and through an analysis of their president's speeches and statements, Silvio Berlusconi's conception of his party emerges clearly. The party model imagined and pursued by him is one that enhances the direct relationship – unmediated by any structure – between the leader and his people, managed autonomously by Berlusconi himself.

To better understand Berlusconi's vision, it can be useful to look at the first definition he himself gave of FI.

The political movement I am offering you is called, not by chance, Forza Italia. What we want to make of it is a free association of voters, one of a completely new kind: not the latest party or the latest faction, which come into being to divide people, but a force that is born with the opposite objective: that of uniting people, in order at last to give Italy a majority and a government that is up to the job of meeting the most deeply felt needs of ordinary people (Berlusconi, January 1994).

The direct reference to the people is already present in 1994, and would be there in every one of his subsequent speeches concerning his political organisations. He defines FI not as a party, but as a popular movement, its organisational structure as one consistent with the idea of a direct relationship – unmediated by other structures – between the President and his electors.<sup>9</sup>

When FI was established, the first Statute approved by the leader outlined a highly structured party, one regulated in accordance with principles of internal democracy. Most of the elective offices were chosen at the base, involving clubs and members, through a system of primaries. Nonetheless, there was no great surprise when, no sooner than it was endorsed, the Statute was completely ignored. In fact, Cesare Previti, the then national coordinator who authored the Statute, put it on ice in favour of an organisation that was totally élite-driven through a number of top-down appointments in relation to which Berlusconi was always the final arbiter. The 1997 Statute institutionalised the huge power of the leader by placing appointment to all the strategic executive offices of the party in the hands of the President or of organs appointed by him, although it introduced some elements of internal democracy relating essentially to the local levels, up to the level of provincial coordinator.

The party of the people was defined more explicitly through the new Statute and the President's subsequent statements. Article 1 defines FI as 'an association of citizens who support the ideals of European liberal democracy, liberal Catholicism, secularism and reformism'. But although Berlusconi wanted a party better organised at the local level in order to achieve better electoral performances there, the 'party of the people' was not to be a vehicle for adherence to a common idea to enable citizens' demands to be aggregated and transmitted upwards. It was to continue to be a party designed to enable its leader to establish an unmediated, direct relationship with ordinary Italians. And, as we shall see, having been structures created as a vehicle for the designs of their leader, FI and the PdL are parties whose members identify not with a political ideal but with the person of Silvio Berlusconi.

The Statute was officially presented in 1998, during the first Congress of FI, where Berlusconi was confirmed as President by acclamation.

In accordance with article 19 of the Statute of Forza Italia and with article 4.1 of the standing orders of the first congress of Forza Italia, the Honourable Claudio Scajola proposes in the name of the office of the Presidency of the congress, the election of Silvio Berlusconi as President of Forza Italia by acclamation, President Silvio Berlusconi's candidature as of right, having been the only one. (The congress accepts the proposal with enthusiastic and prolonged applause) 18 April 1998 (Official proceedings of the First National Congress, p. 211).

On that occasion Berlusconi officially launched his 'party of the people', a non-party party which was directed at the people, as an amplifier of the leader's voice:

So let us begin our deliberations, the deliberations of this party of ours which, if we were to apply to it the labels used by political scientists, we would have to call a party of values and policies. If we wanted to place it geographically, then we would say that it was a party of the centre, the centre of the Italian political system. It is a liberal but not an elitist party; on the contrary, it is a liberal democratic party of ordinary people. It is a Catholic, but not a confessional party; a secular but not an anti-religious or intolerant party; a national but not a centralising party. It is, in short, a party that wants to give itself a very simple name, and it is for this reason that we think that it would be very pleasing to be called, very simply, the party of the people (Silvio Berlusconi, First Congress of FI, Assago 1998).

Nearly ten years later, in announcing the creation of the PdL, Berlusconi insisted that its interlocutors would always be only the People.

Today, a great new party of the people of freedom has officially been born: the party of the Italian people. We invite everyone to join us against the fuddy-duddy and worn-out politicians (*parrucconi della politica*) in a great new party of the people (Silvio Berlusconi, piazza San Babila, Milan, 18 November 2007).

Although the PdL had been present for a long time in the projects and speeches of Berlusconi, the running-board announcement was made without any notice being given to any of his allies or to any of the leaders of FI. But while the former reacted in a hostile manner,<sup>10</sup> FI's leaders immediately showed themselves enthusiastic and ready to support the entrepreneur in this new enterprise.

From the Statute of the PdL, it is apparent that Berlusconi's idea of a party of the people was clearly predominant as a source of inspiration for the new organisation. On a formal level, the charismatic character of the PdL is even more accentuated than in FI. The president's term of office, for instance, which in FI lasted three years, in the PdL is indefinite.

The national President of the People of Freedom is elected by the national Congress through a vote, called for that purpose, which may be by show of hands, in accordance with procedures that shall be set out in the congressional standing orders. The President is the party's political spokesperson, representing it on all official occasions, overseeing the orderly conduct of its business and the definition of its policy and programmatic positions, convening and chairing meetings of the President's Office, the national Executive and Council, and setting their agendas. The President institutes the process of appointment to the party's offices and in consultation with the President's Office takes decisions in accordance with

the procedures established by the Statute. In the event of the resignation or permanent incapacity of the national President, the President's Office immediately convenes the national Council which provides for the appointment of a temporary substitute to cover the period that is strictly necessary for the convening of the national Congress (article 15, Statute of the PdL, 2009).

Besides remaining silent about the President's term of office, these statutory provisions underpin the centrality of the leader – around which the structure of the whole party is shaped, consolidated and moves. Articles 16 and 25 confirm the President's determining role. The former relates to the President's Office, composed of the President (who convenes and chairs it) and other members all nominated by him or elected at his suggestion. The President's Office has the task of implementing the decisions of the national Congress and the national Council, assisting the President in the performance of his functions and consulting with him in matters to do with appointments and the nomination of candidates. The latter article deals specifically with candidatures.

Candidatures are decided by the National president in consultation with the President's Office and ratified by the Coordinators; in the case of regional elections, candidates for the office of regional president are decided by the national President in consultation with the President's Office and the regional Coordinator and ratified by the Coordinators. [article 25, Statute of PDL, 2009]

These two articles give the President strong powers. He actually decides on party appointments and election candidates in consultation with the members of committees which have in their turn been appointed by him or elected at his instigation.

In short, Berlusconi's party model, is – in both its founder's conception and in its statutory provisions – nothing other than a structure created to facilitate a direct relationship between the President and the people, his people. The 'party of the people' conceived by Berlusconi is not a political organisation designed merely to select candidates and mobilise support, much less a structure to enable citizens to relate to and discuss with one another, but simply an extension of its President's will, one whose function is to act as a sounding board for his thoughts and actions among 'his' people.

#### *Forza Italia in the perception of its officials*

To better understand FI officials' perceptions of their party and of their role inside it, it is useful to begin from two fundamental elements that emerged from the interviews:<sup>11</sup> the overlap between parliamentary and party offices and primacy of the leader's choices in the selection of candidates.

As mentioned before, FI has always been characterised by an almost total overlap between the offices of members of Parliament and those of the party's officials. This overlap is the result of an explicit choice on the part of the leader, one driven by two main considerations. The first, of a purely economic character, relates to the lower expenses, indeed the potential gains, for the party that derive there from. Instead of employing party officials, Berlusconi gives these posts directly to his MPs – gratifying them through the conferral of roles with prestigious-sounding titles – while they, dedicating themselves passionately to the job of currying the leader's favour, draw on the services of their parliamentary assistants (who are, of course, paid by the State). In that way Berlusconi is able to exploit public resources as if they were his own, dispensing rewards (such as places in the national or European parliaments or regional council positions) to his liking and also drawing on the earnings of his elected officials who are required to turn over about 20 percent of their salaries directly to the party.<sup>12</sup> Second, in controlling his MPs – through the system of rewards we will describe below – Berlusconi is also able to exercise direct control over his party, so limiting the risk of the emergence of internal opposition which could limit his power.

The selection of candidates is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this peculiar party. Analysis of the Statute is, in this case, insufficient, because the rules often fail to reflect praxis. Through our in-depth interviews with Berlusconi's parliamentarians we managed to obtain insights into the MPs' direct experiences of this fundamental aspect of party life. Candidates seem to be chosen exclusively by the leader at his discretion, and the choices are unappeasable. In the days leading up to the finalisation of decisions about the party's nominations, those who wish to be candidates in 'safe places' on the lists presented for Italian parliamentary elections use every means available to establish direct contact with the leader or with the national coordinator, in order to be reassured, to try to convince the President to nominate them as candidates, to be sure he has not forgotten previous undertakings. Some might even wait outside his house, looking for the best moment to approach him, before or after someone else.

There is a kind of non-party party because the regional coordinators, for example, are unbound by any rule and exist more in order to reinforce their own power than for the benefit of the party. Now there are rules – but they are restrictive. The regional coordinators are nominated by B. and have enormous power because they have the last word in relation to candidatures and therefore put a block on anyone with a different idea or alternative project. The weapon of the candidatures is lethal because if, for example, I say to a local councillor, 'Look, you're upsetting me so I might withdraw your party nomination', then either he disappears, or he falls into line' (a member of Parliament, June 2007).

Analyzing the profiles of FI's parliamentary contingents from 1994, we can see how Berlusconi's criteria of choice varied with time. At first, he sought to recruit eminent people from civil society, individuals representative of a range of professional sectors without previous involvement in politics. Later, with the appointment of Scajola as national coordinator, the main selection criteria were two: on the one hand, a background of previous professional political involvement preferably in the Christian Democratic arena (from which Scajola himself had come) or the Socialist party;<sup>13</sup> on the other hand, devotion to and a personal connection with the leader (Lanza and Piazza 2002). In the fifteenth and sixteenth legislatures, the second criterion seems to prevail over the first.

In 2001 I was elected as a Forza Italia candidate, then I had a disagreement with the great party leader and I went to the cross-benches (*gruppo misto*). I came back to Forza Italia in 2004 because I was asked to, and essentially I found that the party was as I had left it. And in fact though I came back with the blessing of the leader, I found it a struggle to rejoin. I found that there was a system of obstruction which we call 'the blockers', an instrument of power used to prevent anyone with their own following of supporters from joining the party (a Member of Parliament, July 2007)

So, considering that FI MPs are party officials as well, and that the candidates are chosen directly by the leader, their perceptions of the party become particularly interesting. Through analysis of the transcripts of the fifty interviews carried out with FI parliamentarians, having asked them how they came to join the party and what they thought about the structure they were in, we got the clear vision of a party which eludes classical political science definitions. In fact, FI parliamentarians seem to perceive Berlusconi not as a normal political leader who embodies the ideals of his adherents, but more as a father figure, sometimes a master, to whom they are tied by feelings of child-like devotion. Many of them perceive themselves as – and most of them actually are – political creatures of Berlusconi, born thanks to him, people who have important political offices only because of Berlusconi's trust and fondness for them. This affection is returned, bordering, in many cases, on adoration.

Forza Italia finds in Berlusconi ninety percent of its power. To enable Forza Italia to outlast him, the party's leaders should 'make a model' of Berlusconi, making systematic and systemic all that he has done with such imagination and ingenuity (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

Berlusconi places a value on friendship unusual for someone involved in politics. He is a man capable of breaking with conventions, who does not give in to compromises, even over the candidacy of his friends, even over candidatures subject to gossip; the very fact that he has friends he defends to

the utmost, to the hilt... Bare chested, he intervenes in every quarrel and this makes him extraordinary, a man different from all the others (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

I then understood that he [Berlusconi] brought real passion, something that you cannot perceive from the outside. I understood that within him was the grain that is indispensable for a great political project. And it is something you can do neither with money nor with power but only with real passion. I always say I belong to Forza Italia but I do not really feel I belong on the centre right (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

What is particularly striking about the interviews, in fact, is the depth of feeling which most of the parliamentarians have about their leader. Berlusconi is perceived as the charismatic leader who enables people standing by him to rise.

Ours is a leader-dominated, charismatic party (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

Forza Italia is an avowedly leader-dominated party even if it is now becoming a little more firmly structured. That is [to be a candidate] it may be important to have local support, but what counts always is the opinion of the charismatic leader (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

Theoretically, there are democratic arrangements up to the provincial level, but if you look at the Statute too, it is a democracy with few powers because then everything is decided by the regional organisation and above – which is nominated by the leader (a Member of Parliament, March 2007).

A party established by a charismatic leader who speaks to the people directly, bypassing all party structures including the departments – today I am the head of a department – ...clearly needs a non-party party. It is a strategic choice, but also one accepted by us [parliamentarians] because this is a party of the people who love Berlusconi and with a party of this kind the leader must have a free hand (a Member of Parliament, March 2007).

Today the party would not survive if it were abandoned by the leader, it would be unthinkable. But the fact that Berlusconi is irreplaceable is not because Forza Italia is not ready, but because a charismatic leader like Berlusconi is by definition irreplaceable. It is because he is a charismatic leader (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

Knowing President Berlusconi, he will never decide to retire. He has a dream, the party of freedom, the party of moderates opposed to the Democratic Party or whatever it will be. He will not give up and we are aware that a charismatic leader in a party like Forza Italia will be impossible to replace (a Member of Parliament, July 2007)

Each of the interviewees is aware of owing a debt of gratitude to the President, and this ties them even more closely to him. The President has – or at least has had – a direct relationship with each of them, no one excluded.

The parliamentarians reveal in every case an awareness that they joined FI not out of a desire to lend support to a specific political ideal or because of a feeling of belonging a political culture, but simply because they were invited to do so by Berlusconi.

In the end, however, it was a two-hour conversation and there emerged an affinity between us. And in the end, after a single interview [Silvio Berlusconi] asked me if I wanted to be the candidate for the presidency of the region. [...] In 2000 Berlusconi appointed me to the position of regional coordinator of Forza Italia (I was a regional councillor) and I joined the national coordinating committee. And then Berlusconi summoned me to be a deputy in Rome. [...] I'll give you an example: Berlusconi returns from the United States, sees the party lists for the general election and calls me, annoyed because I had not put my name forward as a candidate. I tell him that nobody had asked me, say I am willing, and he places me at the head of the list for my region at the general election. This decision was driven both by the personal relationship he has with me but also by the fact that objectively speaking I was the strongest candidate. Support, trust and ability. I don't know if all candidates went through this but I did (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

When Bondi and Berlusconi asked me to do this, I accepted for the sake of Berlusconi, but since I said 'Yes' to Berlusconi he has given me the chance to start immediately from very high levels... (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

I joined the party in 1994, from the very beginning, first political experience, and I was contacted to join FI. I was contacted by Galan, from Publitalia, and then I met Berlusconi. I was impressed by the personality of this strong man (a Member of Parliament, June 2007).

I'm a close friend of Berlusconi and in 2001 Berlusconi needed an economist in the Senate. I hadn't thought of going into politics and he convinced me (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

It all started with an interview in which I said that I hoped Berlusconi would go into politics. Then he called me and I – who had not thought of going into politics – agreed to run for office (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

Berlusconi, despite his role, manages to take care of a staggering number of personal relations, satisfying his interlocutor every time.

He always appreciated and praised me, it seemed as if without me he could not take his mission forward, and the heart-felt compliments of such a



powerful person would make anybody waver (a Member of Parliament, February 2009).

For me it was dramatic to discover that a man of such stature could ask me how to bring home the water in my region, or how to do triple duties. The pragmatism of the man left me in awe, and I had no difficulty in abandoning the civic list, to which I was very attached, for the sake of Berlusconi (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

Interviewees perceive FI as an organisation belonging to their leader, as a tool at the President's disposal, where he decides everything.

Ours is a party dominated by an owner, no doubt about that. I relate to it in a very simple way, thanks to the fact that the top levels of the party don't interfere locally. The important thing is to demonstrate that in the locality, you work for the good of the party. Those occupying local administrative positions have a role; those occupying national-level political positions have another. I prefer to dedicate myself to the locality (a Member of Parliament, April 2007).

Ours is a slightly anarchic party, in the DNA of Forza Italia and of anyone who has been in Forza Italia, there is an absence of rules, but this is a feature of the party that will remain with us. Today he [Berlusconi] pulls the strings and that is the way it has always been (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

It's not a traditional party. [Forza Italia] was the product of an encounter between a leader and the people. It is difficult to define, and it has problems because it is not structured, but it is looking for a new way to be a party, one whose goal is to be able to relate to the grass roots, to ordinary voters, in the service of our leader (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

And just to emphasise their absolute conviction that the party *is* Berlusconi, many interviewees say that without him they would not remain in FI.

I am not a professional politician so if Berlusconi retired I don't know if I would stay on, I think I would go back to my work (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

I don't think I could remain in Forza Italia without Berlusconi, without him there would no longer be any point in it (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

We're a party based entirely on Berlusconi, because when he takes to the field ... Well... Let us hope God extends the life of Berlusconi for some while longer, because the party without him... I am pessimistic, very pessimistic (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

But more than that, every interviewee showed a desire to please the leader and to avoid disappointing him, just as a child might do with a parent. Their goal was to help and assist the leader as much as they could, and what they did both in Parliament and in the party was all directed at this goal. The party itself was run with enthusiasm not because of the requirements of the officials within it or the needs of voters outside it, but to fulfil the wishes of the President.

We try to focus on what the leader has been able to do for us all, trying to say what we all can do for the leader, so now, trying to strengthen the party on the ground, to make it visible in every town in Italy, to give it that sense of grass-roots democracy, electing all the representatives and maintaining the oligarchic aspect because a leader is a leader and cannot be changed, so broadly based democratic arrangements at the municipal and provincial levels and then a tightening, because otherwise, then, it wouldn't work (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

It is up to us, step by step, to create an organisation which prevents him [Berlusconi] from losing votes. Today FI is Berlusconi and as long as he's around nobody can afford to say 'One day I'll replace him', nobody can (a Member of Parliament, April 2007).

Most of the interviewees are aware that they owe their seat in Parliament entirely to Berlusconi, not having – thanks to the explicit intentions of Berlusconi, who privileges other criteria in the selection of candidates (see above) – significant electoral followings of their own, or particular personal qualities that would justify their positions by giving them resources with which to bargain.

He is the only example in the world of a leader who brings votes to his party rather than, as happens with all the others, being a leader who relies on the votes won by his party. Other parties are themselves the winners of a certain following and he who becomes leader is one able to win a larger vote share than the party alone. In our case it is Berlusconi that controls the vote and it is this that is the real anomaly (a Member of Parliament, March 2007).

The party is Silvio Berlusconi, and we are well aware of that. And in my opinion there is no structure with the potential to outlast him. It is he who brings votes to the party (a Member of Parliament, May 2007).

Another feeling strongly characterising the relationship between the leader and his MPs is the absolute trust placed in Berlusconi. The President is seen as a guide, a point of reference, almost a totem. Most of his parliamentary followers trust his initiatives and are willing to support them, even when they receive no prior warning of them. Berlusconi is seen as a winner, a successful, extraordinary person, one who never disappoints.

He's obviously in love with his country because he could enjoy life with his wife and grand-children instead of dealing with all the problems the Left have created for him and continues creating for him. Without Berlusconi things would be difficult for me too, I have to be honest: he is a guide and a point of reference (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

I have always trusted Micciché and Berlusconi totally and we have always won everything (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

He is the party; he represents the only possibility of victory for the entire coalition. When we go to open-air meetings with him, he brings the house down, no other leader is able to galvanize people the way he can. Here it's enough to announce that tomorrow Berlusconi will make an appearance in the square, and the square fills at once (a Member of Parliament, March 2007).

Interviewees admit that they must have an elastic mindset, the ability to take on board immediately the ideas of a leader, who - gifted with extraordinary powers of imagination and geniality and having a direct relationship with the people - often expresses his thoughts impromptu, usually in public, without previous consultation with members of his party. That is why absolute trust in the President is an essential characteristic for his supporters. His parliamentary followers are often called upon publicly to defend his thoughts and actions without having precise information about what they entail and, sometimes, even without agreeing with them.

I've found myself on numerous occasions finding out about Berlusconi's initiatives from journalists and defending them without even knowing what they've involved. In some cases - I am slightly ashamed to have to admit - I've defended Berlusconi's actions even though disapproving of them, feeling the need to defend him even though he had made a mistake because the good things he was doing so outweighed the bad as to justify it (a Member of Parliament, February 2009).

A last fundamental feature of Berlusconi's party - one which enables us to regard it as a party made up of individuals each of which is an 'only child' - is that, internally, officials confirm that they do not identify with other adherents and there is no sense of collective identity to speak of. There is no *esprit de corps* that can bind them to common objectives, but if anything, the opposite. The direct relationship with the leader - who controls and decides everything - implies that MPs are not incentivised to develop any internal solidarity or sense of common belonging. Each is convinced that s/he has a special tie with Berlusconi, and it is for this reason that s/he is a member of FI in the first place. Everyone refers directly to the President and, as a result, doesn't need the others, towards whom feelings of jealousy often develop. The relationship which establishes itself between them is

thus one of cohabitation, but not one of collaboration. Furthermore, the feelings which bind them to their leader are so strong that they tend to vent frustrations – for example, for failings of party management – on his close entourage, which has very limited powers of decision, rather than on the leader, who is always beyond criticism.

At that point, not due to Berlusconi but to Scajola, it was decided to transform it [FI] into a party. But it was a mistake, on the part of Scajola (a Member of Parliament, July 2007).

If I said that everything was going well, I would be talking nonsense. Especially at the last general election, with a proportional electoral system, those with the ear of party officials received special treatment. This is certainly not Berlusconi's fault but that of his regional level representatives [the regional coordinators are appointed by Berlusconi]; I have been a victim of this. But not due to Berlusconi [...] he has been advised badly (a Member of Parliament, August 2007).

It must be added that it is Berlusconi himself who impedes any aggregative tendencies inside the party, obstructing, for example, all opportunities for the creation of internal groups (which would compel him to engage with his party officials), seeking, as he does, to avoid anything that would limit his power, even partially.

If he had had a group of colonels, he'd have summoned them every time there was a problem and said, 'Now come on!' But if each of us had had a colonel to answer to instead of us each feeling like an only child ... Because this is what he [Berlusconi] has done. He created the 'people's party' and then found he had the 'party of children without siblings' – and children without siblings do not make a family (a Member of Parliament, March 2007)

From the interviews we conducted, it was evident that every FI parliamentarian felt fully a 'child' – proud of his father, of Berlusconi, but definitely not the 'brother' or 'sister' of his party colleagues, with whom he refused to relate because in a sense he preferred to ignore their existence. FI is thoroughly patriarchal, staffed by individuals each of whom is an 'only child'.

Having analysed the fifty face-to-face interviews conducted with the parliamentarians, it is possible to affirm that the officials running Berlusconi's party perceive it as a party in the service of a leader who is master and father; who decides everything, and whose decisions can never be questioned. FI parliamentarians regard their President as an exceptional man, one who is unique; a father to love; a father who guides them. They perceive their party as charismatic, one that is successful thanks only to the leader's power and charisma. Berlusconi is the reason they chose to go into

politics; they jump when he tells them to because they trust him. Our interviews suggest that many of them feel tied to the leader by feelings of genuine and deep-seated trust, in many cases of real veneration.

## Conclusion

Silvio Berlusconi's parties are organisations neither of which has represented a specific social category, a uniform political culture, or a distinct political identity. Berlusconi's parties have always represented nothing other than Berlusconi. And what is most interesting about the material that emerges from this study is that Berlusconi has taken forward his project successfully, creating a party ruling class which perceives the party in the same way. As the interview extracts demonstrate, officials are committed to the leader – not to a set of values or to the party. In their view Berlusconi is the party: they love him; they believe in him; they realise that for most of them their political futures depend on him.

Currently, however, Berlusconism is going through a deep crisis, a crisis that has developed precisely inside Berlusconi's latest party, the PdL. Despite the fact that the PdL was, formally speaking, even more firmly under the control of its president than was FI, structurally it was much more fragile. And this was because, in order to work successfully, Berlusconi's party model needed not only rules that worked totally in favour of the leader, but also – and above all – officials who had been socialised by Berlusconi; ones willing to comply with the leader's decisions unconditionally, who did not expect their positions to depend on the number of votes they could independently bring to the party, who did not need internal democracy and who, on the contrary, rejected it.

The merger with AN brought with it an influx of persons who, besides having more clearly defined values and a sense of their party's history, had a traditional conception of politics, so that few of them were willing to renounce their heritage and convert to Berlusconism. The likely consequences of this crisis are, at the moment, difficult to discern: only time will tell whether Berlusconi will be able to retain the trust of his followers, or whether the split with FLI has affected too deeply the outlooks of the children without siblings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> That is the day on which the constitutive act and the Statute of the party were signed at via S. Maria dell'Anima 31a, Berlusconi's house in Rome, before the notary, Francesco Colistra.

<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, in fact, FI was presented as a movement, precisely to highlight its strong anti-party character.

<sup>3</sup> The reference is to the fact that the new political subject was announced publicly for the first time on 18 November 2007 by Berlusconi, who was giving a quick speech in Milan, in piazza San Babila, standing on the running board of his car.

<sup>4</sup> By Mario Valducci, co-founder of FI and Member of Parliament. The quotation is reported in an interview published in *L'Opinione*, 4 February 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Speech of Italo Bocchino at the launch of Generazione Italia on 1 April 2010, [www.generazioneitalia.it/2010/04/page/5/](http://www.generazioneitalia.it/2010/04/page/5/)

<sup>6</sup> The collegio dei Probiviri is an internal judicial body with the function of seeking to resolve controversies within the party. Its decisions are final and do not allow for appeals (articles 41 and 42 of the Statute of the PdL).

<sup>7</sup> L'Uomo Qualunque (Everyman) was a political party, created between 1944 and 1945 around a magazine and a broader social movement, led by Guglielmo Giannini. Its strenuous opposition to the system of parties (this is the origin of the word '*qualunquismo*', indicating a deep distrust of political parties, viewed as groups of individuals interested in nothing other than their own power) brought the experience to a quick end.

<sup>8</sup> At the 1994 elections Publitalia '80, the advertising concessionaire for Berlusconi's TV channels, organised the selection of the 276 candidates fielded by FI in the single-member colleges for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

<sup>9</sup> The continuous use of surveys by Berlusconi represents another important aspect of his idea of a direct relationship between the President and his electors (Reda, 2011)..

<sup>10</sup> Fini, the AN leader, defined Berlusconi's announcement as 'buffoonery', although he changed his mind some days later, backing the project; Casini, leader of the UdC, dissociated himself, breaking his alliance with Berlusconi.

<sup>11</sup> It is extremely difficult to study Silvio Berlusconi's parties, thanks to the dearth of writings on them and the almost total lack of proceedings and official documents produced by them. The material to investigate the parties is to be found almost exclusively on the Internet, but it is elusive and subject to continuous changes. As a consequence interviews are a very useful tool for obtaining insights into the structure and the internal dynamics of the parties.

<sup>12</sup> The overlap of offices has in recent years become common practice in other parties as has the habit of taking a percentage of the salaries of elected officials. But however much this has happened it has not, in most cases, happened to the same degree as in FI.

<sup>13</sup> In the fourteenth legislature over 60 percent of FI parliamentarians (in both the Chamber and the Senate) were drawn from the governing parties of the 'First Republic', the Christian Democratic component among them being the most numerous (Lanza and Piazza, 2002)..

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