

What Giorgia Meloni's maiden speech to parliament told us about Italy's future

*Italy's new Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, gave her maiden speech to parliament on 25 October. **James L. Newell** assesses what the speech told us about Meloni's priorities and the policy agenda of her government.*

On 25 October, Giorgia Meloni gave her programmatic speech to the Chamber of Deputies, the 'lower house' of the Italian parliament. Such speeches are important, as they are the vehicles through which newly appointed governments set out their legislative programmes. They are also the bases on which such governments ask the two branches of the legislature for confirmatory votes of confidence – votes they are obliged to obtain as a condition of holding office once they have been appointed by the President of the Republic.

Such speeches are also a source of clues as to the prospects of the new government and the ambitions and outlooks of the persons making them. This is especially pertinent in the case of Meloni given that her party's deepest ideological and organisational roots go back to the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), formed in 1946 by survivors from Benito Mussolini's Repubblica di Salò. Because of this, in the immediate aftermath of the election, commentators were busy trying to work out whether Meloni was a wolf in sheep's clothing or a sheep in wolf's clothing. So, what did the speech tell us?

An uncompromising statement

Giorgia Meloni honoured tradition by confining herself mainly to statements of aspiration, such as guaranteeing to all Italians 'a future of greater freedom, justice, well-being and security'. Politicians prefer such statements to those implying definite commitments as they create fewer hostages to fortune and, by appealing to universally held beliefs and values, are difficult for opponents to question. In the absence of much that is concrete in them, drawing conclusions about the political significance of such speeches requires a willingness to interpret and to read between the lines.

From this point of view, it was difficult to disagree with those for whom the speech was

an [uncompromising statement of the values of the right](#). Fewer than half of Italian citizens voted for the parties staffing her government. Nevertheless, she began by referring to ‘the clear indication expressed by the Italian people on 25 September’, going on to claim that her government is ‘wholly representative of the will of the people’ – thereby signalling that rather than attempting to be inclusive and governing through the search for workable compromises, she will lead a government that will brook no opposition.

Her government will not, she said, shrink from taking decisions, where necessary, that are unpopular. The only reference to ‘diversity’ came, not in connection with the idea of cultural diversity or pluralism, but in reference to the right’s frequently made juxtaposition between ‘European integration’ and ‘nations with ancient histories’ ‘each with its own identity’. The theme of protectionism, if not autarchy was present in references to ‘predatory ambitions threatening to undermine strategic national industries’; to ‘technological sovereignty’; to the need ‘to ensure that we are not dependent on far-away countries to provide food for our children’.

There were no references to the role of international cooperation in the resolution of problems. Although there were references to fascism and its anti-Semitic laws as ‘the most dishonourable episodes in Italian history’, these were by implication diluted by her later condemnation of ‘the years of political violence’ when ‘in the name of anti-fascism’ ‘innocent youths were clubbed to death with spanners’.

Policy commitments

Meloni did make reference to at least four more or less specific commitments of note. One was the commitment to a constitutional reform that would give Italy a presidential form of government, to be introduced by the search for cross-party consensus if possible but which the government will not back down on in the face of any opposition of principle. The second was deregulation; the third was a tax amnesty; the fourth, abolition of the anti-poverty ‘citizenship income’, significantly framed as a subsidy to people who failed ‘to do their bit for Italy’. In addition, there was a commitment to additional measures to stop the arrival of refugees from North Africa, referred to as ‘illegal immigration’ and framed, as ever, as a security issue.

All of this suggests that Meloni has a clear vision of the Italy she wants to create: an Italy

that is economically neo-liberal, socially conservative, and politically rather authoritarian. Yet there was little in her vision that was new. Even what was arguably the most radical aspect of her programme, namely the proposal for constitutional reform, reflected assumptions from the past. These were long-standing assumptions among Italy's political elites that the country suffers from a governability problem whose resolution requires the adoption of plebiscitarian principles whereby elections function as mechanisms for the direct investiture of leaders who thereby acquire the authority to issue orders.

In response, then, to the question, 'who is Giorgia Meloni?', one answer is that she is a conservative. This is the ideology she professes to be inspired by in her [autobiography](#), and she is fond of quoting Roger Scruton (as she did in her programmatic speech). Her mentor is Gianfranco Fini, the man who, at the end of the Cold War, successfully overcame the barriers that had once kept the MSI in isolation and stood in the way of it finding allies in the construction of a coalition to oppose the left.

After renaming the party the National Alliance, he later agreed to a merger with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia in the hope of creating a modern national party, committed to law and order and upholding the Constitution, which would give Italy the strong conservative party it had always lacked. Meloni seems to want to continue this project and to do so by waging an ideological battle in which she is not a fascist but is opposed to anti-fascism – the ideology that inspired the drafting of the post-war Constitution, and thereby excluded the Italian right. Her ambition is therefore to overcome this exclusion and reinvigorate the deeply conservative values it stands for.

A blessing in disguise for the left?

It is possible that the very clarity of Meloni's vision might, paradoxically, help the Democratic Party, in its newfound role as a party of opposition, at last to clarify the nature of its own vision, as it so sorely needs to do if it is to stand a chance of making an electoral comeback.

And if (as seems possible if not likely) the proposed constitutional reform involves democratic backsliding, undermining the Italian parliament's capacity to hold governments to account, then the opposition parties will have an enormous amount to get excited about and to unite around. From the point of view of her opponents on the

left, therefore, the advent of Giorgia Meloni might just turn out, in the long run, to be something of a blessing in disguise.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit:

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