

Matteo Renzi's transition to power is a gamble not just for his party, but for the Italian political system as a whole

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Last week Italian prime minister Enrico Letta resigned, with the general secretary of the Partito Democratico, Matteo Renzi, expected to take over as the country's new PM. [Arianna Giovannini](#) and [James L. Newell](#) assess Renzi's transition to power and the stakes for both his party and the wider situation in Italy. They note that although Renzi was the obvious successor to Letta, he was expected to wait until new elections before making a bid to become prime minister. By moving now he is taking a calculated gamble that his image as a 'reformer' will not be undermined by the fractious coalition that hobbled his predecessor.



Nearly one year after Italy's [watershed elections](#) – elections which produced no clear winner and led to the creation of a wavering grand coalition government – the country faces yet another unexpected political turn. After a mere ten months in office, the PM Enrico Letta was ousted by his own party (the Partito Democratico, PD) on Thursday last week, and tendered his resignation to the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, the day after. [Matteo Renzi](#), the young and ambitious new general secretary of the PD – the main party of the centre left, and Italy's largest – is now expected to receive a mandate to form a new government in the next few days, becoming the country's youngest PM at 39. What explains this development, and what is its significance for Italian politics and more broadly?



Who is Matteo Renzi?

As far as the first (and, indeed, the second) of these questions is concerned one has to appreciate, in the first place, who Renzi is. He had first acquired attention at national level as mayor of Florence from 2009 – big-city mayors having been well-placed in recent years to cultivate very high profiles and considerable personal followings for themselves thanks to a 1993 reform giving them enhanced powers and enabling them to run councils on presidential lines. From such a position he had been able to build a considerable following within the PD, earning himself the nickname, *il Rottamatore* ("the scrapper"), with his calls for internal party reform based on a generational turnover among its leadership ranks. Though in 2012 he had been defeated by PD general secretary, Pierluigi Bersani, in primary elections to choose the centre left's candidate prime minister for the general election of 2013, the fact that the PD failed, against expectations, to win, paved the way for an election to replace Bersani – for a challenge, that is, that Renzi was only too willing to take up.



Matteo Renzi and Enrico Letta
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Victory at the 8 December general secretary elections, open to ordinary voters, had been a foregone conclusion: he was the "change candidate" promising to overturn the traditional oligarchies in a party born, a few years previously, from the simple merger of the bureaucratic apparatuses of its predecessors and which therefore struggled to appear to be something genuinely new. He successfully projected himself as a politician offering a "soft" form of the anti-political sentiments espoused by Beppe Grillo and the Five-star Movement, enabling him to articulate the centre-left

electorate's growing mistrust of the political class.

Unexpected challenge to Letta

In the second place, his successful challenge to Enrico Letta has come as a surprise to many. Not long ago, in a [previous blog post](#), we argued that it would be unrealistic to expect Letta to cede place to the Florentine mayor without putting up a fight for the premiership, or to expect Renzi to lead a revolt against his own party's PM. On the one hand, it seemed that the lifespan of the incumbent government had probably been shortened by the mayor's emergence, since his credibility as an agent of change necessarily implied distancing himself from an executive which, by its very nature as a grand coalition, was driven by a constant search for compromise. After all, Renzi sought to project himself as a young and charismatic leader, one capable of delivering a Blair-style policy revolution which, by inaugurating a "third way" designed to appeal to both sides of the left-right divide, would also revolutionise Italian politics generally.

On the other hand, though winning the 8 December contest handsomely, Renzi had only minority support among PD members and it seemed he would want to avoid jeopardising his popularity outside the party by being seen to be responsible for an early government collapse. Biding his time as the leader of a reformed PD, a leader standing outside the Government, it seemed likely that he would be in a position potentially to lead the centre left into fresh elections, free of the burden of having to defend the record of an outgoing austerity administration in which his own party had been the senior partner. In January he appeared to have succeeded, where so many others before him had failed, in achieving cross-party agreement for much needed reform of the [electoral law](#). The expectation was, then, the one he had encouraged in the aftermath of his coronation as PD secretary when he had publicly declared his hostility to "wide coalitions", arguing that he wanted to become prime minister by winning an election, so as to assume office with a public mandate.

Renzi's gamble

In the third place, then, one has to have some answers to the question why, against these expectations, Renzi has chosen to take the risk of losing his credibility (and, as a consequence, any forthcoming electoral contest) by making a strategic move which is reminiscent, in a most alarming way, of the [First Republic](#) and its ruthless political class.

One possible answer is straightforward personal ambition. Media commentary since the move has been dominated by observations concerning the risks he is running. His actions have exposed him to charges that he has grabbed power by cunning rather than through an above-board contest following an electoral-law reform, and that he is therefore little different to the politicians he vowed to "scrap". He has also faced the accusation that his sweeping reform proposals (which include a new electoral law, reform of the labour market, a revision of the bicameral system, and cuts in public spending) are unrealistic and indicative of personal arrogance, given they are dependent on a profoundly divided parliament and the same fractious coalition that hobbled his predecessor.

But, in an age of personalised and mediatised politics, perhaps such commentary in fact explains precisely *why* Renzi has made his move: he is a man with little ideological baggage; his popular appeal lies precisely in his reputation for wanting to take on and shake up the existing power structures against the odds. Adopting a strategy framed in the media as "foolhardy", then, paradoxically adds to his stature as a politician – adding to a perception that he is someone in whom hopes for "salvation" can justifiably be placed, given his seeming preparedness to put his entire career at stake in the cause of breaking the power of the old guard, the hated "political caste".

How the move took place

Finally, then, with a possible answer to the question of "why?", one has to have a sense of *how* the change has come about. The first problem was Letta's removal from office – which could not realistically be expected to be achieved through a parliamentary vote of no confidence at the hands of one of the governing parties, in the absence

of a specific pretext for calling such a vote. It could only come through the first-hand actions of Renzi himself through the extra-parliamentary organisations of the party he now led. Of these organisations, the one chosen was the *Direzione nazionale* – the executive committee for the party's supreme policy-making body, the *Assemblea nazionale*, elected in concomitance with the general secretary.

The motion proposed by Renzi spoke of “the urgent need to initiate a new phase with a different executive, one that has the political strength to deal with the issues confronting the country with a view to completing the legislative term together with the current governing coalition and a programme open to the requests of social and economic interest groups”. It was approved by 136 votes to 16 with 2 abstentions. Although it made no mention of the possibility of Renzi taking Letta’s place, this, given the context in which it was passed, was understood by all concerned to be the motion’s political significance. And there were several reasons for expecting this understanding to be borne out by events.

Renzi was gambling on being able to exploit his popularity to head an executive capable of lasting longer and being more incisive than that of his predecessor. He had persuaded the *Direzione* to back his gamble and thereby, indirectly, had persuaded his party’s parliamentary representatives to do so: the longer they kept their seats without facing fresh elections the more their pensions would be enhanced; they could be expected to fall in line with the wishes of a *Direzione* and general secretary on whom their political careers were more or less dependent.

Letta understood he had been deserted and resigned. Napolitano could be expected to confer a mandate on Renzi given that all the signs were that he would succeed in winning the confirmatory vote of confidence that all new governments must, constitutionally, ask for, once they have been sworn in. And the expectation concerning Napolitano’s conduct was reinforced by the stated ambition for the new executive to see out the legislative term (which would end in 2018).

What now for Italy?

If the latest turn in Italian politics has been driven by forces that can be more or less accurately reconstructed, then it is somewhat harder to pin down its likely future significance. Three things, however, seem clear. Renzi’s administration will be the third government in just over two years to have taken office as a consequence of events other than the winning of a parliamentary majority through victory in an election contest. This in itself will constitute an element of weakness the new government will have to contend with: a confirmation of the democratic deficit currently expressed by Italy’s political institutions.

Second, the associated risks seem especially great in the present as compared to the previous two instances. Mario Monti took office as a technocrat with the specific remit of dealing with an economic emergency. Letta took office as the head of a grand coalition aware that economic and political stability required it. Renzi, on the other hand, will take office thanks to a mere shift of power from one party faction to another: a shift orchestrated by Renzi and his team from within the ranks of the PD, with a degree of (indirect) support from the President. Moreover he will take over from Letta thanks to an extra-parliamentary decision for which – arguably – no real political explanation has been given other than the need put in office an individual deemed to be a good communicator, but of whose political principles and capacities for national office little is in reality known.

Finally, therefore, if Renzi fails in his reform programme, if he fails to reduce the pressures of Italian citizens’ disenchantment, lack of trust and occasional overt rejection of their political class, then the consequences could be very serious indeed: not just for himself and his party but for the political system as a whole. As the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari points out, referencing a well-known song from the 1930s, before long Italy and Renzi may be heading for ‘stormy weather’.

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About the authors

Arianna Giovannini – Leeds Metropolitan University

Arianna Giovannini has recently completed her PhD at the School of Cultural Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University. She recently edited a special issue of the Italian journal *Polis* on [Politics, citizens' engagement and the state of democracy in Italy and UK](#) with James L. Newell. She is Communication Officer of the PSA's [Italian Politics Specialist Group](#).



James L. Newell – University of Salford

James L. Newell is Professor of Politics in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences at the University of Salford. He recently edited a special issue of the Italian journal *Polis* on [Politics, citizens' engagement and the state of democracy in Italy and UK](#) with Arianna Giovannini. He is Treasurer of the PSA's [Italian Politics Specialist Group](#).



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