

# Berlusconi's surrender over Enrico Letta's confidence vote could spell the end of an era in Italian politics

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Last week Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta survived a confidence vote in the Italian Senate following a dramatic U-turn by Silvio Berlusconi. [James L. Newell](#) writes that the crisis, which began when Berlusconi instructed ministers from his PdL party to resign from the government, has left the former Italian Prime Minister severely weakened. For the first time, Berlusconi has been forced to bow to pressure from his supporters over a major issue, which may well signal the end for his career as a political leader.



On 2 October, the Letta government in Italy [won a vote of confidence](#) that seemed considerably to strengthen it following months of uncertainty about its future and the sense that it was highly fragile. The vote had been engineered by Silvio Berlusconi, and the sense of drama associated with it was considerably heightened when, during the preceding debate, the entrepreneur entered the Senate chamber suddenly to announce a humiliating climbdown: he and his followers would oppose the no-confidence motion.

Just a few days previously the Government's survival had been put in doubt by the announcement that ministers belonging to Berlusconi's People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL) party would resign. They had apparently been instructed to withdraw from the Government by the entrepreneur in protest at a 27 September Cabinet decision to postpone discussion of a series of matters in the area of economic and fiscal policy including Value Added Tax. Thereby it became clear that the Government would almost certainly be unable to achieve a promised postponement of the VAT increase decided by the previous Monti government due to come into effect on 1 October.

The VAT issue cited as the reason for the ministers' resignations was widely regarded as a pretext. Berlusconi claimed that the Government's decision violated the agreement on which the coalition was based. Prime Minister Enrico Letta replied that the postponement decision had been made necessary by the earlier announcement on the part of PdL parliamentarians that they would resign en masse out of solidarity with

Berlusconi, whose future was to be the subject of a vote by the Senate elections committee on 4 October. On that date the committee would decide on whether to recommend to the Senate that it vote in favour of Berlusconi's expulsion following his 1 August conviction for tax fraud.

Letta had argued that the PdL parliamentarians' threatened resignation created such uncertainty about the Government's capacity to pursue its programme that there needed to be clarification, in Parliament, about whether it could carry on. Then, when announcement of the ministers' resignation came, Letta echoed a view widely shared among media commentators that the gesture had actually been motivated by Berlusconi's personal interests.



Silvio Berlusconi (Credit: Lorenza e Vincenzo Iaconianni, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

These personal interests arose from the position Berlusconi found himself in following his conviction. He had been caught up in numerous judicial investigations into his business affairs over the years. What made this case different was that for the first time, charges against him had been upheld by the Court of Cassation, Italy's highest court. In the past, he had always managed to take advantage of the automatic right of appeal from courts of first instance to the Appeal Court and from there to the Court of Cassation. This had enabled him in some cases to avoid prosecution by exploiting his great wealth and the relative slowness of the Italian judicial process to ensure that proceedings were 'timed out' thanks to the statute of limitations. In other cases, he had used his position as Prime Minister to secure the passage of legislation aimed at rendering the work of the judiciary more difficult, or decriminalising the acts of which he was accused.

Now, however, he was out of office and faced with charges that he had bought the rights to screen American films through a series of offshore companies that had resold them to each other at inflated prices each time, allowing him to evade taxes and pocket the difference. On 26 October 2012 he had been sentenced to four years in prison, a decision upheld by the Appeal Court on 8 May 2013 and by the Court of Cassation on 1 August.

In the meantime, the Monti government, driven by deep popular dissatisfaction with standards of probity in public life as well as awareness of the actual costs of office holders' abuses, had passed the so-called Severino Law. This bans those convicted of crimes carrying a penalty of two years or more from being members of Parliament or holding other offices and renders them ineligible to stand as candidates for such offices for at least six years. In deference to the separation-of-powers principle and in accordance with article 66 of the Constitution, which reserves to Parliament the power to determine the eligibility of its members, the Senate itself would have to decide whether Severino applied in Berlusconi's case.

Berlusconi presumably calculated that if he succeeded in bringing the Government down he could provoke fresh elections, which might enable him to avoid the consequences of 1 August: though the outcome of a new poll could not be taken for granted, voting intentions data were not discouraging either and his Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, Pd) opponents on the centre left were in trouble. The party's decision to join Berlusconi in coalition following the inconclusive election outcome in February was deeply unpopular among its supporters. On the other hand, it might suffer most from any government collapse if Berlusconi could [frame the event](#) as "a battle against moves by the centre-left to raise taxes as part of [the following] year's budget discussions". The risk was that collapse might provoke turmoil in the financial markets, for which Berlusconi himself might be blamed, and bring a decline in the share value of his companies.

And it was presumably the awareness of this risk that led each of the ministers "ordered" to resign, one by one to line up to express their misgivings until it became apparent that the threat to bring the Government down might provoke a major party split. From this it became apparent that, notwithstanding Berlusconi's stance, the Government would survive the confidence vote anyway. Berlusconi's dramatic last-minute U-turn was therefore the consequence of an awareness that he no longer had the power and authority to call the shots on the centre right – presumably because his age (77) makes him a rapidly wasting asset.

The widely held assumption when the Government had taken office was that it would be weak because it depended on the cooperation of Berlusconi who had the power to withdraw the support of his followers any time he wished. Now that power had been put to the test and found wanting. This was a dramatic new development in Italian politics: for the first time, Berlusconi, the leader of a "personal party", created by him and for him, had been forced to bow to the will of his followers. Though his political demise had been predicted and disconfirmed many times in the past, now, more than ever before, his career as a political leader seems to be drawing to a close.

For the past twenty years Berlusconi himself – his role in politics, his legal difficulties, his conflict of interests – has been the main cleavage structuring political conflict in Italy. Therefore, Letta's description of the events of 2 October as "historic" could well turn out to be much more than a politician's hyperbole: we may indeed be witnessing the end of an era.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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