

The Lega Nord in the Second Berlusconi Government: In a League of Its Own

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For regionalist populists like the Lega Nord, participation in coalition at national level requires striking a delicate balance between being a party of government and a movement of opposition. The key to this is choosing the right 'friends' and 'enemies' within government. In contrast to its previous time in power in 1994, in the second Berlusconi government (2001–05) the Lega cast itself as the Forza Italia leader's most faithful ally, while being seen to be in almost constant conflict with its fellow junior coalition partners: Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and the UDC. Indeed, as AN repositions itself within a respectable governmental 'European' Right, so the Lega appears ever more in a league of its own within the Italian centre-right. Based on exclusive recent interviews, this article examines the Lega's relationship to its heartland and its positions on issues such as immigration, Europe, globalisation and constitutional reform. We argue that the party has transformed itself into an 'institutionalised' populist movement that has successfully walked the tightrope of being seen to have 'one foot in and one foot out' of government.

In this journal in 2003, Reinhard Heinisch discussed the problems faced by populist movements when in office and asked the important question: 'can they preserve their political essence after achieving power and thus create a distinctly new type of government beyond the traditional political cleavages?' (Heinisch 2003: 91). Italy's Lega Nord (Northern League) provides us with an interesting case study in this respect as the party has already served twice in centre-right governments led by Silvio Berlusconi: briefly and acrimoniously in 1994, and far more successfully, although not without controversy, from June 2001 to April 2005. It is thus now possible to examine the role of the Lega Nord within the centre-right coalition during

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the second Berlusconi government and assess the extent to which its time in office has changed the nature of the party.

For regionalist populists like the Lega Nord, participation in coalition at national level requires striking a difficult balance between being a party of government and a movement of opposition. To retain the core support of its northern provincial heartland, the Lega and its ministers must be seen to remain 'untainted' and 'pure' despite sharing power with the reviled 'professional politicians' of 'national' parties which represent opposing territorial, social and economic interests (Diamanti and Lello 2005). Moreover, the Lega has to show its voters that the compromise inherent in entering the enemy citadel of 'Rome' is justified by results. In his 2001 study of the Lega Nord, Damian Tambini wrote that 'the evidence is that the party cannot survive for long in the Italian government, because governing from Rome challenges its very *raison d'être*' (Tambini 2001: 148). Contrary to such expectations, and despite the many problems within the Casa delle Libertà (House of Liberties – CDL) coalition, the Lega remained part of the longest serving government in the history of the Italian Republic (McDonnell and Albertazzi 2005). As Heinisch rightly noted, while most populist parties in Western Europe suffer from a series of structural weaknesses which render long-term participation and success in government extremely difficult, the Italian case 'demonstrates the ability of right-wing populism to learn from past mistakes and launch a political comeback' (Heinisch 2003: 119). Having lasted less than a year in the first Berlusconi-led coalition in 1994, the Lega not only managed to survive for four years in the second Berlusconi government, but succeeded in presenting itself simultaneously as both 'the opposition within government' and a driving force behind high-profile areas of government policy. As a result, despite the absence of its charismatic leader and founder, Umberto Bossi, from the political arena for almost a year due to serious illness, the Lega Nord has not only retained the support of its grassroots, but saw its vote rise in European and subnational elections in 2004 and 2005.

Following a discussion of the Lega's path back to government and its relationship with its coalition partners, this article analyses the party's link with its heartland and its stances on key issues such as immigration, the Euro and constitutional reform. On the basis of the evidence thus far, we argue that the Lega has successfully walked the populist tightrope of being seen to have 'one foot in and one foot out' of government. We show how, as part of this strategy and in contrast to 1994 when he identified Berlusconi as his chief enemy in government, this time Bossi sensibly allied himself with his fellow Lombard 'new' politician in a 'northern axis' against the pro-southern 'old professional politicians' of the Lega's junior coalition partners, the post-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and the former Christian Democrats of the Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e Democratici di Centro (UDC) who have moved closer together over the last four years, clearly with an eye to a post-Berlusconi future centre-right. Indeed, as Yves

Mény and Yves Surel observe, AN now represents at best a ‘borderline case’ of populism and, for that reason, we believe that it is essential to differentiate between AN and the Lega rather than simply lumping the parties together under the umbrella tag of ‘Right wing Italian populists’ (Mény and Surel 2004: 243). In the final section of the article, therefore, we assess the position of the Lega within the current Italian centre-right and conclude that as AN tries to reposition itself within a respectable ‘European’ Right alongside the likes of the French RPR, so the Lega has moved in the opposite direction towards other right-wing populists in Western Europe.

From Padania to Devolution: 1994–2005

In terms of numbers, the 2001 general election was a disaster for the Lega Nord as it confirmed the declining trend in the party’s vote seen in European and local elections over the previous five years. From its best ever result of 10.1 per cent in the 1996 general election, the Lega’s share of the national vote plummeted to just 3.9 per cent in 2001 (see Table 1). Moreover, from its position as the most voted party in the North in 1996 (Biorcio 1997: 86), with peaks of 42 per cent in sub-alpine areas, in 2001 the Lega saw its vote halved or worse across Lombardy and slashed by two-thirds in other important northern regions such as Veneto, Piedmont and Friuli Venezia-Giulia. A comparison with 1994 is also illuminating: while after the 1994 elections the Lega sent 180 MPs to Rome (thanks to a highly advantageous seat agreement in the North with Berlusconi’s Forza Italia which gave the Lega a vastly inflated number of seats), in 2001 the Lega’s parliamentary presence was reduced to just 43. Both in terms of percentages and members elected to Parliament, therefore, the 2001 result represented the Lega’s worst general election performance since its breakthrough as a significant political force at the beginning of the 1990s.

The numbers do not tell the whole story however. As Benito Giordano points out, while in 1996 the Lega had ‘electoral weight but no political power... following the 2001 election it has little electoral weight, but a

TABLE 1
ELECTORAL PERFORMANCES OF THE LEGA NORD, 1990–2004

Year	Type of election	%
1990	Regional	4.8
1992	General	8.7
1994	General (proportional part)	8.4
1994	European	6
1996	General (proportional part)	10.1
1999	European	4.5
2000	Regional	5
2001	General (proportional part)	3.9
2004	European	5

Note: The 1990 figure refers to the Lega Lombarda, a forerunner of the Lega Nord.

degree of political power' (Giordano 2003: 227). In fact, the excellent 1996 result meant little in practical terms as the party subsequently had no influence in determining the composition of the new government and was left stuck in the no-man's land of bipolar politics, irrelevant to both the governing parties of the centre-left and the centre-right opposition coalition. Instead, the role of 'kingmaker' (the main prize for smaller parties in Italy) fell to the far-left Rifondazione Comunista (RC) which backed Romano Prodi's Ulivo government. While Italy moved to the left, the Lega moved from federalism to secessionism with the party advocating independence for 'Padania', an invented nation covering most of Italy's northern regions. This shift was based on a number of motives. Firstly, while once the Lega had been the sole voice of federalist and fiscal reform, by the mid-1990s these causes were being (at least superficially) embraced by parties on both Left and Right. In particular, Forza Italia (FI) had become a threat to the Lega in its heartland of the former Christian Democrat-voting provincial North. Secondly, the move to a secessionist position was predicated on the hope/expectation that Italy would fail to meet the entry criteria for European Monetary Union (EMU) (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001: 106–9). This would have left northern industry in deep crisis and more disposed towards the radical solution of untying the North from the yoke of an inefficient central government and an unproductive South. Thirdly, the 'Padanian independence' campaign of demonstrations and events initially attracted a lot of media attention and thus represented a continuation of the Lega's practice of 'spectacular politics', designed to ensure maximum visibility in the Italian media (Tambini 2001). Separatism proved to be an unsuccessful and expensive gamble, however, and the productive North from which the Lega had emerged showed little interest in Padania, especially after the Prodi government had piloted successful Italian entry into EMU. As a result, the late 1990s were years of dwindling electoral fortunes for the Lega, characterised by bitter internal splits and disillusionment among its support base.

Following the party's disastrous performance in the 1999 European elections, however, the Lega was handed a lifeline as the other centre-right parties accepted the fact that, although weakened, the Lega could still help them defeat the centre-left in northern constituencies at the next general election. Having abandoned 'Padanian secession' for the party's new Holy Grail of 'la devolution', the Lega agreed to join the CDL coalition in time for the 2000 regional elections, which saw the centre-right triumph in a highly personalised contest between a resurgent Berlusconi and the centre-left Prime Minister, Massimo D'Alema. Although accepting its inevitability and utility, however, the Lega and the other parties of the CDL approached their new alliance with understandable trepidation. The same 'broad' centre-right had spent a brief and acrimonious period in government in 1994, with the Lega quickly becoming the 'opposition within government' and bitterly attacking the Prime Minister, Berlusconi, before finally provoking the

coalition's fall from power in December of the same year. In order, therefore, to reassure voters that the CDL and the Lega were serious about governing, Bossi and Berlusconi signed an agreement which supposedly guaranteed rapid approval of devolution in return for solid and enduring Lega support for Berlusconi and his policies (Loiero 2003).

Following the CDL victory in 2001, it quickly became apparent that the position and role of the Lega in the new centre-right coalition presented a number of important differences compared with 1994. Firstly, the Lega now had a significantly weaker electoral mandate than the 8.4 per cent it had secured in 1994 and far fewer deputies than it had gained on that occasion. This decline in its public mandate and parliamentary representation was offset, however, by the second major difference: the privileged relationship which Umberto Bossi seemed to enjoy with the Forza Italia Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and Finance Minister, Giulio Tremonti (who had helped bring the Lega back into the centre-right fold and is perceived as being very close to the party). As tales of the three men meeting for Monday evening dinners seemed to indicate, the new government was divided into two main groups: the 'northern inner circle' of the three pro-business 'new' politicians from Lombardy: Berlusconi, Bossi and Tremonti, and the so-called 'sub-government' made up of the former First Republic 'old' politicians, the former Christian Democrats of the UDC and the post-Fascists of AN, both perceived as being 'pro-South' and sympathetic to the public sector (Diamanti 2005). The Lega thus became part of an axis which, at least in appearance, was the main driving force of the second Berlusconi government. In return for his support for devolution and refusal to condemn Bossi's more controversial stances and comments, Berlusconi received unswerving backing from the Lega on issues of personal interest to him such as the reform of the justice system and media regulation. While the relationship between the Lega and Forza Italia (and particularly between the leaders of the two parties) has clearly improved greatly since 1994, therefore, that between the Lega and the other members of the coalition has gone from bad to worse. Given its strong support for Berlusconi, the Lega can only play its 'opposition within government' role by publicly fighting with its fellow junior coalition partners of the UDC and AN. This conflict is not only based on issues and policies, but involves the Lega's rejection of the very essence and legitimacy of these parties. Reflecting this internal division, Bossi has often therefore portrayed himself as the defender of Berlusconi against the 'professional politicians' of the AN and the UDC, depicted as plotting with an eye to a post-Berlusconi era in which they can reconstruct a 'broad centre' along the lines of the 'corrupt' First Republic *Partitocrazia* (Partyocracy). As a result of this strategy, the Lega has been in near-permanent conflict with its junior coalition partners, with Berlusconi taking on the public role of peacemaker and 'broker' between them (Hopkin 2004).

The internal equilibrium of the CDL became even more complicated after the June 2004 European and local elections (see Table 2). As mid-term

elections go, these were certainly not a disaster for the CDL, as its main opponent, the centre-left coalition *Uniti nell'Ulivo* (United in the Ulivo), attracted roughly the same percentage of votes as its two main components (the DS and *La Margherita*) had received in 2001. The elections were of great importance for the centre-right, however, as they made Berlusconi's predominant position within the alliance more difficult to justify. While *Forza Italia* had gained 61 per cent of the total votes cast for the CDL in 2001, in 2004 its share of the centre-right vote fell to 48 per cent. Luckily for the alliance, but not for Berlusconi, the loss of about four million votes in three years by FI was counterbalanced by the success of its coalition partners. The UDC's share of the vote doubled and the *Lega's* rose to 5 per cent as the party regained ground in its traditional strongholds of the North (see Table 3). However, if the European elections brought bad news primarily for Berlusconi, but not necessarily for the centre-right alliance as a whole, the local elections, held on the same day, were damning for all but

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF THE 2004 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AND THE 2001 GENERAL ELECTION

2004		2001	
List	%	List	%
1 <i>Uniti nell'Ulivo</i>	31.1	1. DS	16.6
2 Rif. Comunista	6.1	2. <i>Margherita</i>	14.5
3 Others on Left	8.3	3. Rif. Comunista	5
		4. Others on Left	7.9
1-3 Total centre-left	45.5	1-4 Total centre-left	44
4 <i>Forza Italia</i>	21.0	5. <i>Forza Italia</i>	29.4
5 AN	11.5	6. AN	12
6 UDC	5.9	7. CCD/CDU	3.2
7 <i>Lega Nord</i>	5.0	8. <i>Lega Nord</i>	3.9
8 <i>Socialisti uniti</i>	2.0	9. <i>Nuovo PSI</i>	1
4-8 Total centre-right	45.4	5-9 Total centre-right	49.5

Note: The DS and *La Margherita* were united under the banner '*Uniti nell'Ulivo*' in 2004. The UDC and the *Nuovo PSI* are the respective successors of the CCD/CDU and the *Socialisti uniti*.

Source: Elaboration of data from the Ministry of the Interior.

TABLE 3
PERCENTAGE OF VOTES GAINED BY THE LEGA NORD IN FOUR KEY NORTHERN REGIONS IN 2001 AND 2004

Region	2001	2004
Piedmont	5.9	8.1
Lombardy	12.1	13.8
Veneto	10.2	14.1
Friuli Venezia-Giulia	8.2	8.5

Source: Adapted from *Il Corriere della Sera*, 15 June 2004, 14.

the centre-left. Worryingly for the CDL, wherever moderate and left-wing parties managed to create broad coalitions stretching from the heirs of the centre-left former Christian Democrats to the far-left RC, they beat the centre-right.¹ This pattern was repeated in April 2005, as the centre-right alliance suffered a crushing defeat at the regional elections, losing in 12 out of the 14 regions which went to the polls and winning only in the Forza Italia and Lega strongholds of Lombardy and Veneto.

While the UDC leader Marco Follini may have spoken gleefully of the 'end of the absolute monarchy' within the coalition in the aftermath of FI's poor performance in the European elections, the reality is that it would be impossible to handle the differences within the CDL and convince the public of the coalition's viability without a very strong leader. Whether the junior partners like it or not, Berlusconi and Forza Italia represent the 'glue' of the centre-right coalition, the essential link in the chain between very different parties and territories (Diamanti and Lello 2005). Nonetheless, the UDC and AN did profit from both their 2004 results and the absence of Bossi, who fell suddenly and seriously ill in March 2004 and has since undergone a difficult and lengthy period of rehabilitation. In particular, the two party leaders, Gianfranco Fini (AN) and Follini, were able to apply enough pressure on Berlusconi to secure the resignation of the Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti and many spoke of his departure as a death blow to the 'northern axis' within the cabinet. However, the passing of devolution in the Senate in March 2005 amid threats by Lega ministers to resign and the partial return of Bossi to political life suggested that those who had been quick to write off the Lega had, once again, spoken too soon (*La Repubblica*, 17 March 2005). As we write (April 2005), it remains to be seen whether, in the long run, the newly formed third Berlusconi government (consisting of the same parties) will provide anything more than superficial responses to the calls by AN and the UDC for a significantly reduced role for the Lega, a watering-down of 'la devolution' and greater attention to the problems of the South or whether Bossi's party will nonetheless continue to remain a highly relevant force within government. Certainly, the return of Tremonti to the cabinet as joint vice-premier in the new government does not augur well for the Lega's opponents within the CDL. Furthermore, the increased demands of the UDC and AN may allow the Lega even more space to play its winning card of loudly opposing these parties in the run-up to the 2006 election.

Populism in Power: The Lega Nord's Approach to Government

After four years in government, it seems opportune to ask to what extent the Lega, a populist regionalist movement born to oppose the Italian party political system and, for a time, even determined to break up the Italian nation-state, has been absorbed into that very system and tamed by its experience in power. Lega ministers such as Roberto Castelli (Justice) and

Roberto Maroni (Welfare) have held key positions in government since 2001 and the party now has a political class made up of ministers, junior ministers, MPs, MEPs and subnational representatives who have enjoyed power and its trappings for many years. There has always been a tension within the Lega between the die-hard grassroots activists of the movement and its high-ranking institutional representatives, pejoratively termed by some members as the '*partito delle auto blu*': the party of the blue (official) cars. Indeed, it was by exploiting this faultline within the Lega and presenting himself as the one true interpreter of the people's will that Bossi reasserted his position as party leader in the mid-1990s when his dominance of the movement was called into question after the divisive experience of government. In an interview for this article, the Lega MP Giancarlo Pagliarini said that these 'institutional' members constitute a formidable obstacle to bringing about change within the party. Indeed, Pagliarini formally proposed setting a limit on how long members could serve in Parliament, a move which was blocked, he claims, by those in the Lega hierarchy who now conceive of public service as their sole career. Has the Lega become a 'normal' party then, simply interested in power for its own sake? How has it been able to walk the tightrope of participation in government without leaving itself open to accusations of having 'sold out'?

As we suggested in the introduction, the eternal dilemma which successful regionalists (such as the CiU in Catalonia) and 'alpine populist' parties (such as the FPÖ in Austria) must contend with is whether they should (a) protest from a 'periphery' (geographical, political, etc.), retaining 'purity', but having far less possibility of effecting change and thus leaving themselves open to appearing 'irrelevant' in the eyes of voters or (b) participate in central government, gaining influence, but risking a loss of credibility and support amongst their hard-core support. The Lega's response to this dilemma since 2000 has been to take the route of entering government, but keeping 'one foot in and one foot out of institutions' (Tarchi 2003a: 154; see also Minkenberg 2001). For this strategy to be successful, however, high-profile representatives of the Lega must not be *seen* to have become part of 'Rome', whether in terms of the linguistic register adopted by Lega ministers in interviews, their perceived attachment to the perks of office, overly friendly relations with non-Lega government colleagues and so on. Furthermore, the party has to be *seen* to be strongly critical of at least some of the 'national' and 'professional' politicians with whom it (reluctantly) governs. The Lega 'of government' must, therefore, be a 'fighting Lega' (Tarchi 2003a).² The trick, as the Lega's experiences in government have demonstrated, is to pick the right friends and enemies within the coalition. In contrast to 1994, by singling out his fellow northern populist Berlusconi in 2001 as his friend and patron in contrast to the traditional politicians of the UDC and the AN, Bossi struck on a combination of friends and enemies within the CDL which allowed him to respect the Lega's populist regionalist 'outsider' identity while also

influencing policy and thus demonstrating the utility of participation in national government.

According to Heinisch, it is precisely the populist character of parties such as the Lega and the FPÖ that accounts 'for their success in opposition as well as for their difficulty to succeed in public office' (Heinisch 2003: 91). Firstly, they are often unable to produce a 'government team' of satisfactory quality, given the tendency of the all-controlling leader to remove those who appear too independent or achieve too high a public profile and/or stature within the party. Like other populist parties based on a charismatic founder-leader, the Lega boasts a long list of apostates who have been removed by Bossi for becoming too vocal and visible and thus impinging on his position as the focal point of the movement. As a result, only those who have been willing to pledge (frequently and publicly) their total allegiance and subservience to 'the founder' have been allowed to remain among the party elite. However, unlike 'flash-in-the-pan' populist parties, Bossi has had 20 years to build up an inner circle of such devotees and the likes of Maroni, Castelli, Giancarlo Giorgetti and Roberto Calderoli not only subscribe (at least publicly) to the maxim of 'the Lega is Bossi and Bossi is the Lega', but have also proved capable both of serving at the highest levels of government and guiding the party during Bossi's absence over the last year.

A second difficulty for populists is that the radical slogans that bring in votes can only usually be translated into policies by conceding so much ground to moderate forces that they lose much of that radicalism in the process. As a consequence, holding office often produces a 'taming effect' (Minkenberg 2001: 2) and the impact of populists in government tends to be felt more in terms of a changing political culture than actual public policies. This has been partly the case in Italy, as we shall see later, with the Lega's positions on 'extracomunitaria' (non-EU) immigration, which have produced more modest results than originally envisaged. Nonetheless, we believe that, despite having held office for four years, the Lega has not been 'tamed' by its experience in government to any great extent and has in fact punched far above its weight in the CDL. In the following sections of this article, we seek to substantiate this claim by considering the Lega's relationship to the productive provincial North from which it emerged and its positions on issues such as immigration, the EU and the Euro, protectionism and constitutional reform. To highlight the extent to which the Lega really is 'in a league of its own' within the Italian centre-right, we will draw comparisons with another member of the CDL, Alleanza Nazionale, which has moved in the opposite direction to the Lega during its time in government.

The North and its 'Others': The Lega Nord and Immigration

The primary achievement of the Lega in the 1980s and early 1990s was to articulate successfully the grievances of the productive provincial North. As John Dickie says, the Lega 'managed to get people to think of political and

social problems in territorial terms' (Dickie 1996: 29). Writing of the period from 1987 to 1990, Ilvo Diamanti says that Bossi 'redefined the concept of territory' (Diamanti 1994: 672). The Lega leader reshaped the economic, political, historical and cultural reference points of the North into a community of 'interests' and 'values' and juxtaposed them with those of the Italian state and the South. Beyond the conceptual and geographical borders of the Lega's 'North' lay enemies. This strategy necessitated the nurturing of a process of identity-formation and a sense of cultural homogeneity within the imagined borders of the Lega's North. The party therefore constructed a framework of interpretation in which a positively evaluated 'us' – honest, hard-working and simple-living provincial northern Italians attached to their local traditions – was posited as prey to a series of overlapping 'them' – southerners, the state, big business and immigrants. In this way, the Lega provided 'a new source of self-respect' for its followers (Tambini 2001: 105). Presenting himself as their 'saviour', Bossi offered redemption from the sins of First Republic 'Italy' by casting his people as victims of the Italian state and proposing an alternative, positive identity in the new promised land of an autonomous North. It would be unfair, however, to say (as many scholars and journalists did at the time) that the Lega *only* preyed on fears of the 'other' and external threats. In its early years, the party also proposed practical solutions to the problems of the North through a process of economic and institutional reform which would enable the productive provincial North to adapt to the challenges of globalisation and European integration (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001).

The party's relationship to this constituency has, however, changed over the last decade. Rather than being the defender of the North 'of small businesses and Catholic political traditions' (Diamanti 1996: 125), which wanted to be part of globalisation and an integrating Europe, but was hampered by the ballast of 'Rome' and the South, the Lega has now positioned itself as the defender of the North *against* globalisation and the European Union (Betz 2002). This anti-globalisation aspect of the party, always present in terms of the Lega's anti-big business and anti-immigration stances, extended rapidly into other policy areas following Italian entry into EMU. Diamanti views the Lega's shift during its 'secessionist' phase to increasingly anti-globalisation and anti-European positions as simultaneously signifying its 'progressive secession from the socio-economic classes and contexts from which it originated' (Diamanti 2001: 304). From being an innovative political movement, therefore, it became one which primarily 'reflects and reproduces fear' (Diamanti 2003: 72) and the Lega's experience in government, far from slowing down this process, seems instead to have accelerated it.

Essentially, the Lega reproduces fear of the perceived effects of economic and cultural globalisation: European integration, immigration, multinational corporations, secularism, international free trade, pension reform, multiculturalism, the blurring of identities, etc. This move by the party towards protectionism and a 'Fortress Europe' stance has set the Lega

against many of the northern entrepreneurs who once supported it. For example, although there are undoubtedly many people in the provincial North who do not want to see immigrants in public spaces or rent apartments to them, there is also (at times, paradoxically, the same people) an important part of the population which needs these immigrants for its factories (Betz 2002; Pastore 2004). So, while the Lega has opposed immigration on the grounds that it threatens local northern culture and security, at the same time the industrialists of the party's north-eastern heartland have campaigned for larger visa quotas and more immigrant labour. Reflecting this divergence of views, Nicola Tognana (former President of the Veneto Industrialists and Vice-President of Confindustria) stated clearly in 2003 that 'the Lega's policies on immigration do not represent us', adding that the Lega had lost contact with the reality of north-eastern industry where 'in the vast majority of cases, immigrant workers have earned respect and admiration' (*Il Secolo d'Italia*, 12 Oct. 2003). Ignoring Tognana, Bossi subsequently asserted that 'immigrants and foreign goods are two sides of the same coin', and repeated his call for strict quotas for both (*La Repubblica*, 29 Oct. 2003).

Within the CDL alliance, it is the attitude of AN towards the 'other' that seems to have changed most in recent years, although certainly not as suddenly or as radically as the Lega would have us believe. The 2002 'Bossi-Fini' law on immigration was widely seen both in Italy and abroad as the tough answer of the far-right to the supposedly 'soft' policies previously introduced by the centre-left. However, the overall results for the Lega of the process of tackling immigration within the CDL have in reality been rather mixed, as Asher Colombo and Giuseppe Sciortino very clearly demonstrate (Colombo and Sciortino 2003). For instance, despite the Lega's repeated statements that no *sanatoria* (amnesty) would be granted to illegal immigrants, the Bossi-Fini law was eventually accompanied by a *sanatoria* which led to the legalisation of about 700,000 immigrants: more foreign workers than the amnesties of the Dini government in 1995 and the Prodi government in 1998 put together (Colombo and Sciortino 2003: 195). Indeed, according to Ferruccio Pastore (2004), with the exception of the 1986 US amnesty, this was the largest ever of its type. Furthermore, by accepting the link between the opportunity to stay in the country and the ability of the immigrant to work and produce, the Lega has implicitly subscribed to an idea that, at least in some of its policy documents (e.g. Marelli 2002), the party still refuses even to consider, i.e. the idea that immigration is economically *necessary*.

As Jonathan Hopkin comments, within the Casa delle Libertà, 'Forza Italia plays a role of broker, allowing its main coalition partners to claim some 'victories' in the reform package, whilst limiting itself to less visible gains' and this aspect of the CDL was again in evidence over the immigration question (Hopkin 2004: 25). While the *sanatoria* was economically necessary and responded to the demands of northern industry

and the many middle-class families relying on foreign domestic servants, it also represented a kind of 'compensation' for the UDC, a party composed of former Christian Democrats and inspired by Catholic values, for whom the tone of the Bossi-Fini law was hard to digest. Given the extent of the *sanatoria*, however, the Lega required another small 'victory' in return and this came in the form of the introduction of headline-grabbing measures such as mandatory fingerprinting of immigrants and the use of the navy in fighting clandestine entries along Italy's porous coastline. As Colombo and Sciortino argue, however, these were essentially symbolic 'sweeteners' for the Lega in exchange for the much more practical concession of the amnesty to the UDC (Colombo and Sciortino 2003: 208).

While the Lega has thus maintained and reinforced its tough rhetoric on immigration (whatever the practical consequences of the new legislation), a change in the position of AN was signalled by Gianfranco Fini's proposal in the autumn of 2003 to extend the vote in local elections to immigrants legally resident and working in Italy for at least six years. Although many commentators saw this as marking a huge shift in Alleanza's rhetoric, it was not entirely unexpected. In fact, as Marco Tarchi (2003b) notes, since AN's formation in 1995 (mostly by members of the neo-Fascist MSI), the party's position on immigration has been in constant evolution. At its 1998 Verona conference, despite the unsurprising definition of immigration as a 'social problem', AN (unlike the Lega) accepted its *inevitability*. Moreover, at the party's 2001 Second Programmatic Conference in Naples, immigration became 'necessary for Italy's very survival', a position clearly at odds not only with that of the Lega, but also with that of many of the rank and file of Alleanza itself. As was to be expected, the Lega rejected Fini's proposals to extend the vote to immigrants, seeing it (rightly) in the context of the AN leader's recent attempts to reposition the party closer to the centre both in Italy and at European level (e.g. his 2004 visit to Israel and renunciation of the latter days of the Fascist regime).

The hue and cry caused by Fini's proposal was due to its profoundly symbolic, rather than practical, implications. The novel aspect was in the admission (resisted by a significant number of those at grassroots level in AN) that foreigners could at least be *partially* integrated into the community before they had a right to apply for Italian citizenship and even when they did not plan or need to surrender their original nationality. A new identity-position was thus identified which responds to the present mobility of workers: it is located in between the unredeemable 'otherness' of the *extracomunitario* and the acquired 'sameness' of the 'no-longer-foreigner', i.e. those who earn their Italian citizenship. At least theoretically, therefore, a new class of 'almost citizens' came into being: while still not 'us', these people could nonetheless demonstrate that they had renounced what was unacceptable about 'them', namely the willingness to exploit Italy's riches with little consideration for the rule of law. According to Fini's proposal, immigrants in full-time employment and with no criminal record could place

themselves outside the category of ‘them’ due to their proven ability to *contribute* to Italian society (*La Repubblica*, 2 March 2004).

The response of the Lega, which now claims to stand alone in defending the rights of ‘the natives’, has been a typically ethno-nationalist one. Despite paying lip-service to the values of anti-racism, the Lega has always in fact essentialised what are *cultural* differences, by turning them into quasi-genetic characteristics, a short-cut to exclusion that seems to work (Albertazzi and Fremeaux 2002; Gomez Reino-Cachafeiro 2002). So, in this instance, Bossi noted that, far from being something you could earn through good behaviour and work, the prize of active and passive representation should be reserved for those who are prepared to renounce their differences by becoming ‘us’. Recognising ‘different levels’ of belonging and participation in the life of the community opens up a can of worms for the Lega, as it makes the boundaries between the Italian (or the ‘Padano’) and the ‘other’ more nebulous and hence negotiable and open to interpretation (Moncalvo 2003). True to its populist nature, the Lega has vowed to fight the multiculturalist elites of both Left and Right, who are portrayed as united in their desire to deprive ‘the common people’ of what is rightfully theirs and theirs alone, i.e. exclusive access to the advantages of Italian citizenship. Through its calls for privileged treatment for northerners ahead of ‘outsiders’ in relation to public housing, state jobs and health service provision, the Lega is now the only party in the CDL which embraces the type of ‘welfare chauvinism’ beloved of traditional European right-wing populist parties such as the Front National in France.

Fortress Europe and Euroscepticism

While immigration has always been a major concern for the Lega Nord, ‘protectionism’ is a recent addition to its list of watchwords and highlights the Lega’s radicalisation and break with the ‘reassuring’ liberalism of its past. In a move reminiscent of recent campaigns by the *Lega dei Ticinesi* in Switzerland (Bignasca 2004), the Lega Nord has made much of the need to defend Italian business from China, the latest addition to the party’s long list of external ‘enemies’. As Bossi said: ‘we are under attack from China. We have to remove the taboo from the term “protectionism”’ (*La Repubblica*, 17 Aug. 2003). This position underlines the gap which has emerged between the Lega and the export-focused industrialists of the provincial North, for whom a return to protectionism at world level would be disastrous. In an interview for this article, Bossi’s right-hand man Giancarlo Giorgetti said: ‘The Lega was born to challenge political taboos. The claim that you cannot impose tariffs is one of these taboos’. To reinforce the point, he added that economic liberalism should not be seen as dogma by the party.

While proposing policies aimed at isolating and protecting Western Europe, the Lega has also significantly changed its stance on European

integration and the Euro. Although some within the movement, such as Giancarlo Pagliarini when interviewed for this article, acknowledge that Italy, which traditionally had a weak currency, has benefited from adopting a stronger one, the party line now is that 'the common people' have paid far too high a price due to Euro-generated inflation. Indeed, in our interview with him, Giorgetti said that he doubted whether the regions of the north-east had benefited at all from entering the Euro-zone, given that the government is now unable to sustain an export-based economy through artificially induced inflation, as it has done in the past. On this point, Gian Paolo Gobbo told us that the Euro had only caused problems for those the party represents in the economically dynamic Veneto region. The party's shift on the EU and the Euro can be traced back to Italy's acceptance into EMU under the centre-left Prodi government which of course deprived the Lega's 'Padanian independence' stance of its potential trump card. Thereafter, the Lega was free to embrace the kind of anti-EU discourse and positions common to populists across Europe and it duly did so. As we can clearly see from Bossi's comments in his 1998 book 'Processo alla Lega', the party thus adopted a virulently anti-EU stance during its isolationist and secessionist phase when it was still highly critical of Berlusconi and Fini and certainly not, as Raj Chari, Suvi Iltanen and Sylvia Kritzinger claim, in order to move the party closer to the positions of AN and FI (Bossi and Vimercati 1998; Chari *et al.* 2004).

To an extent, however, the Lega's policy on the Euro must be seen within the overall context of the CDL which has sought to use the single currency as an excuse for the ills of the Italian economy. In particular, the former Forza Italia Finance Minister and Lega ally, Giulio Tremonti, was critical of the Euro and attempted to link it to Romano Prodi, former President of the European Commission and the centre-left 'candidate-in-waiting' for the next general election, by blaming 'Prodi's Euro' for Italy's stagnant economy. Berlusconi has also blamed the Euro for increased inflation and his failure to bring about the second Italian 'economic miracle' which he had promised voters (*La Repubblica*, 23 Jan. 2004; *Il Corriere della Sera*, 25 Jan. 2004). The unity between the Lega and Tremonti in their opposition to the Euro was evident from the introduction of the single currency in 2002 and helped provoke the resignation of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and former WTO Director-General, Renato Ruggiero. When Ruggiero objected to the comments and tones of Bossi and Tremonti in their criticisms of the Euro in January 2002, Bossi accused him of being a friend of the Left and asked whether it made sense to keep him in the government. Just for good measure, and to render the Foreign Minister's position untenable, he added that he did not care what an unelected bureaucrat like Ruggiero had to say (*Corriere della Sera*, 4 Jan. 2002). In this instance, however, the suspicion remains that the episode was managed 'from above' in order to remove an awkward figure, whose appointment had been promised to secure the pre-election support of Gianni Agnelli, but who quickly became dispensable. As

on other occasions over the last four years, Bossi publicly said what Berlusconi was unable to.

While the Lega has been joined by FI in attacking the Euro, a very different rhetoric on Europe can be found among the other members of the CDL, the UDC and AN. Indeed, Alleanza Nazionale's mission statement for its 2002 Bologna Conference referred to the party's aim of achieving *more* unity among the nation-states of Europe. It proposed creating a confederation of nation-states, an idea that would obviously be anathema to the strongly anti-EU movements such as the UK Independence Party and the Liga Polskich Rodzin (League of Polish Families) with which the Lega is allied in the Independence/Democracy group in the European Parliament (EP). While AN's group in the EP, the Union for a Europe of the Nations, does contain the Eurosceptic Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party), it is also home to the Irish Europhiles of Fianna Fáil and AN has made it clear that it sees its future in Europe as part of a pro-European Gaullist-type respectable Right. The common currency, therefore, is not conceptualised as a problem by AN. While there has been mild criticism of how the Euro has been managed at supranational level, the party has avoided radical statements on Monetary Union that could be taken as evidence of 'Euroscepticism'. To underline the party's respectable 'European' credentials (and his 'statesmanlike' and 'prime ministerial' qualities), the AN leader, Gianfranco Fini, sought and won the role of Italian government representative to the European Convention in January 2002. Once again, this highlighted the growing differences between Bossi and Fini. It would have been simply unthinkable to have the leader of the Lega Nord in such a position, given how often he has defined the EU as an undemocratic union run by bureaucrats and communists. Fini's rise from the Fascist margins to international respectability was confirmed in November 2004 when he was appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs, another role which it would be unimaginable to give to a member of the Lega Nord. Indeed, Fini used his first subsequent interview with the Italian press to condemn the opposition of the Lega to Turkish accession into the EU (*La Repubblica*, 19 Dec. 2004). Alessandro Cè of the Lega responded by telling Fini from the platform of an anti-Turkish accession rally in Milan: 'you have given up the best aspect of your political past, which was that of defending the identity of your people'; and the Minister for Welfare, Roberto Maroni, called for a referendum on Turkish membership of the EU despite the Italian government's official position in favour of it (*La Repubblica*, 20 Dec. 2004).

Constitutional Reform

The passing of the devolution bill as part of the government's constitutional reform package in the Senate on 23 March 2005 was hailed by the Lega as marking the most significant step yet towards the achievement of its main stated aim in government: 'la devolution' (*La Repubblica*, 24 March 2005).

Although the bill still has further parliamentary hurdles to negotiate, it has passed the most difficult stages in which amendments could be introduced. The major remaining potential obstacles will be a premature end to the CDL-dominated Parliament and early elections or a significant shift of power away from the Lega within the third Berlusconi government. In addition, there will probably be an anti-devolution referendum, which the centre-left and some sections of the UDC are likely to promote. If the Constitution is eventually changed, however, the regions will acquire exclusive legislative competence on matters of public health, local policing and education. Devolution of course still falls short of allowing regions to raise their own resources. When interviewed, Giancarlo Pagliarini made it very clear that he regards the proposed devolution bill as merely a tentative first step in the right direction. Indeed, he claimed he had only voted for the reform because 'told to do so' by the leader. Bossi himself acknowledged that the reform was only partial in March 2005 when he spoke of gaining 'political federalism' in this legislature and the 'fiscal federalism' required to operationalise it in the next (*La Repubblica*, 21 March 2005). However, even if devolution does not grant regions the level of autonomy Bossi might wish to see, it does at least signal that powers in key areas can be transferred from the state to the subnational level and that the Lega is a leading actor in this process. This represents a much-needed symbolic victory for the movement and increases hopes among its supporters that a 'spillover effect' could result in mild devolution leading eventually to a genuinely federal institutional structure.

While AN is, understandably, highly suspicious of reforms that could jeopardise the unity of the nation, it has broadly accepted the devolution of some powers to the regions in response to public opinion on the issue and Berlusconi's strong support for the Lega's position. However, AN was also well aware that this mild form of devolution is only a first step for the Lega. The party therefore championed the introduction of a French-style presidential system to counterbalance the centrifugal measures promoted by the Lega. While a proposal along these lines was presented to Parliament by AN in 2002 (Nania 2002), the CDL was unable to reach agreement on the issue and instead struck a compromise based on what is termed 'premierato forte' (strong premiership), a change supported by both FI and AN. To further assure voters (particularly in the southern strongholds of AN, FI and the UDC) that the Lega has not been given *carte blanche* to break up the state, the new constitutional reform bill also reiterates the role of Rome as the sole capital of Italy.

The Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale: Travelling in Opposite Directions

The events of the last four years have shown that it is misleading simply to group AN and the Lega together under the 'Italian populist extreme Right' banner. The reality is quite different and far more complex. On the one

hand, AN is completing its journey towards the respectable European Right and hopes to compete for the support of centrist voters. On the other, the Lega continues to employ ethno-regionalist rhetoric and has fully embraced the populism of European 'New Right' parties such as the Nouvelle UDC in Switzerland and the FPÖ in Austria. As Tarchi's insightful analysis of Alleanza Nazionale's recent policy documents (2003a) shows, the political culture of AN has yet to find a stable form. AN, he says, is 'squeezed between ally-competitors that challenge it on the turf of programmes that are liberal...populist...and solidarist...' (Tarchi 2003a: 178). Indeed, Fini's party still occasionally needs to make strategic retreats to positions which recall the old MSI in order to assuage fears among its hard-core support. Moreover, as Piero Ignazi (2000: 250–60) points out, the 'conversion to democracy' and rejection of the Fascist experience by Fini and the party hierarchy has not radically changed the beliefs of the party's grassroots. Nonetheless, the pace of change within AN over the last ten years has been brisk and its positions now differ very considerably from those of the Lega Nord, as Table 4 illustrates.

The June 2004 and April 2005 European, local and regional election results indicate that while the recent attempts by Fini to relocate his party more firmly within the European Right may have been successful in terms of the government positions now occupied by AN and its increased international legitimacy, they have not yet had a major impact at the polls. In fact, AN seems to be stuck at a maximum possible share of 10–12 per cent. What the party is able to do now that would have been rather more difficult before, however, is to prepare for a not-too-distant future in which a 'conservative', 'normalised' AN will be able to make alliances with Catholic

TABLE 4
OFFICIAL POSITIONS ON SELECTED ISSUES OF THE LEGA NORD
AND AN

Lega Nord	AN
National community: the North (Padania)	National community: Italy
Anti-South	Pro-South
Constitutional reform: devolution	Constitutional reform: presidentialism + institutional polycentrism
Immigration as folly, bringing cultural and social disintegration	Immigration as economic necessity, to be regulated
Exclusion of the 'other'	Progressive cautious integration
Anti-globalisation	Globalisation is an inevitable process that must be managed
Anti-US and anti-NATO (e.g. Kosovo campaign)	Officially pro-US and pro-NATO (but grassroots more critical)
Anti-EU in principle and practice	Critical friend of EU in principle Pro-EU in practice
Anti-Euro	Pro-Euro
Protectionist	Pro-social market economy
Populist (refutes labels such as 'Left' or 'Right')	Conservative, proudly right wing

moderates without scaring them off due to its supposed 'extremism'. While it may be too early to claim, as Rinaldo Vignati (2001) does, that AN has reached the shores of the liberal Right in its journey towards an Anglo-Saxon conservative model, we can say that the AN leadership has shown a consistent 'conservative propensity' (Tarchi 2003b: 175), fuelled by an appetite for power and a clear determination to move beyond its Fascist past. If Fini's long-term project of edging the party into the realm of the democratic European Right is successful, then one day there may be no need for a Berlusconi-type figure to act as 'guarantor' for the liberal credentials of a future centre-right government. That day may come sooner than expected as the 'Berlusconi model', which has dominated the centre-right and Italian politics since 1994, appears to have lost much of its shine following the 2004 and 2005 electoral defeats (Diamanti and Lello 2005). While both AN and the UDC are clearly planning for a post-Berlusconi future and Italian industrialists start edging closer to the centre-left as they foresee its victory in the next general election, Berlusconi and Forza Italia now appear isolated with only the enduring support of the Lega for comfort. The problem for AN and the UDC, however, is that as long as Berlusconi and Forza Italia are in politics, then the other parties of the CDL appear condemned to stay together unless they are prepared to jettison their chances of winning elections and entering government. In other words, only when the transitional figure that is Berlusconi has left the political arena will the Italian centre-right be able to move beyond its current decade-long transitional phase and towards a new, more permanent configuration.

Conclusions

By pursuing a discourse of Euroscepticism, xenophobia, anti-Islamism, protectionism and devolution, the Lega Nord has been able to preserve a distinctive identity within the CDL alliance, proudly overtaking AN on the Right on several issues. And yet, precisely because it behaves as the 'internal opposition' within government, the Lega has been able to act as Berlusconi's most faithful ally, however contradictory this may initially seem. The Lega can no longer 'play the game' on its own without risking extinction, as was demonstrated by its time in the political wilderness between 1996 and 2000, but it also needs to reaffirm its separate and distinct identity by opposing the pro-South, paternalistic, more moderate instincts of the 'professional politicians' of the UDC and AN. Berlusconi also profits from his closeness to a party that doggedly and vociferously protects him from the various 'leaders in waiting' within government and whose ministers such as Castelli (Justice) help him to pursue his personal interests by acquiescing to his demands in ways that ministers from AN or the UDC might refuse to do. While the Lega's misbehaviour in class and yet obsession with pleasing the teacher may be the only strategy the movement can conceive of at present in order to survive, it has also proved a highly successful one. So long as there

is some visible progress on decentralisation, whatever the term (federalism or devolution) that is used to define it, the Lega is generally content with gaining symbolic victories on some issues and loudly proclaiming its opposition to others. Clear examples of the former include an immigration law that does not work, but which introduces mandatory fingerprinting of non-EU citizens – a hugely important measure in terms of the message it sends out. The visceral opposition to major public works in the South and the fight against Turkish entry into the EU are examples of the latter.

The case of the Lega Nord in the second Berlusconi government (2001–05) demonstrates, therefore, that it is possible for a regionalist populist movement to successfully keep ‘one foot in and one foot out’ of institutions and even see its support rise while that of the coalition falls. This behaviour and strategy of the Lega has caused serious problems, however, for the *other* centre-right forces with whom the party governs (in particular, the Christian Democratic UDC and the ‘would-be-moderates’ of AN). The question that now needs to be answered, although it does not fall within the remit of the present analysis, is what happens to moderate forces once the populists have gate-crashed the party. In the case of Austria, Heinisch (2003) says that the moderates have gained at the expense of the populist FPÖ. However, as the results of recent elections and the recriminations following the end of the second Berlusconi government clearly show, the case of Italy is very different. The largely southern-based UDC and AN have suffered because of the disproportionate influence of the Lega in the CDL, as the conservative-leaning South has become disillusioned and started moving towards the centre-left. Whether the UDC and AN can radically alter the power balance within the coalition in the year before the 2006 general election remains to be seen. What we can say at this stage, however, is that in the four years of the 2001–05 Berlusconi government, the Lega Nord represents the most successful case of a Western European party which has been able to walk the precarious populist tightrope of government participation without slipping.

Notes

We would like to thank Giancarlo Pagliarini, Gian Paolo Gobbo and Giancarlo Giorgetti for agreeing to be interviewed for this article. Pagliarini served until recently in the Milan municipal government and is an MP; Gobbo is an MEP, Mayor of Treviso and the leader of the Liga Veneta, a key regional branch of the Lega Nord; Giorgetti is an MP and leader of the Lega Lombarda, the most important regional branch of the party. He is considered the closest member of the Lega to Umberto Bossi and is a likely future leader of the party. The interviews were conducted as follows: Gobbo in Padua on 12 May 2004, Pagliarini in Rome on 13 May 2004 and Giorgetti in Milan on 25 June 2004.

1. To understand the scale of the disaster one should consider the following: out of 21 provincial capitals, the centre-left won all but 3 on the first ballot; furthermore, out of 231 municipalities, the centre-left gained 171 after the second round, with only 53 going to the centre-right.

2. Another 'league', the Lega dei Ticinesi in the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland, also found itself facing a similar dilemma after its initial success. On the 'normalisation' of the party following its participation in regional government, see Mazzoleni (1999).

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