

## **LONG OR SHORT GAME : THE ITALIAN NORTHERN LEAGUE AND THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY**

*Mark A. Urquhart*

### **PRAGMATISM LEAGUE STYLE**

'Hold your nose and vote'. This was the last pre-election advice in March of this year to Northern League supporters from their pragmatic leader Umberto Bossi. It came when he was asked how League supporters should act in the 30% of northern constituencies where candidates from Silvio Berlusconi's newly-formed *Forza Italia* were running for the coalition 'pole of liberty'. It worked a treat. In the remaining 70% of the new first-past-the-post constituencies in the populous north, the League, through its geographical concentration in the Veneto, Piedmont and especially Lombardy, maximised its side of the electoral alliance overseen by Berlusconi and also including the neo-fascist National Alliance.

In the new Chamber of Deputies the Northern League remarkably stands as the largest single party with 122 seats, though *Forza Italia* can rely on the backing of the 32 deputies of the right-wing splinter from the old Christian Democrats to add to their 97 representatives. Bossi, alongside Gianfranco Fini, leader of the reborn National Alliance who have 109 seats, has been thrust to the centre of Italian politics. He has the power to make or break any potential government, as was evidenced by the League's role in forcing Prime

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Minister Berlusconi's embarrassing climb-down from his decree releasing the *tangentopoli* suspects held without trial. Bossi has also been persistently critical of Berlusconi's *Fininvest* interests, and categorically rejected the Prime Minister's recent scheme for a blind trust to oversee his business and media interests in a controversy which will have to wait until after the summer recess for resolution.

However, the months since the March election have also shown the tightrope which the League has to walk to stay in power, with Berlusconi threatening on several occasions to return to the electorate, confident, at least until his recent confrontation with the judiciary, that he could eat into the League's Northern base. The League has swung from outright opposition to firm support, most recently in the August 1994 lira crisis, and such a malleable stance has brought much criticism. In short, Bossi's party wields a degree of influence over the Roman centre which Scottish nationalists can only dream of, but it is power balanced on a knife-edge and it may well transpire that association with an increasingly discredited government will bring long-term political disadvantage from their short-term electoral gain.

This paper seeks to analyse the most recent events in Italy from the perspective of the Northern League and to contrast this with the Scottish National Party's slow but sure ascent to its current position as Scotland's second largest player. Such analysis can be easily written off on the grounds that Italy is very different from British, and, especially, Scottish politics. It is my contention, however, that in terms of partisan politics and electoral manoeuvres there are as many similarities as differences between the League and the SNP. Specifically both parties face a tension between their short-term and long-term orientations - between the dramatic breakthroughs of October 1974 or April 1992 respectively and the more gradual build-up of support which stays loyal from election to election, which the SNP were so pleased to highlight in the June European elections results and which the League had experienced consistently until those same elections.

With reservations as to their tactics in the recent Monklands by-election, the SNP, under the leadership of Alex Salmond, have played the long game, seeing breakthroughs such as the control of Regional Councils or the taking of the North-East European seat as stepping stones rather than one-off successes, with much made of the bandwagon effect. This approach stands in sharp contrast to that applied by the Northern League in the Italian general election in March of this year. In the first election to be conducted with 75% of the seats decided on a first-past-the-post system, Umberto Bossi took his party into an alliance with two very strange bedfellows:- the populist, grass-

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roots *Forza Italia* movement of media mogul and industrialist Silvio Berlusconi (the name comes from a football chant which translates as 'Come on, Italy!') and the neo-fascist National Alliance which is led by Gianfranco Fini and comprises the former Italian social movement (MSI) and other rump far-right groups.

The arrangement was very strained throughout the campaign, with Bossi's favourite theme (since given substance by many of Berlusconi's appointments), being that *Forza Italia* simply represented '*i riciclati*', that is politicians and functionaries recycled from the old, discredited First Republic. However, like the SNP in the Central Belt, Bossi was aware that the League would be unlikely to win many seats outright, at the same time realising that Berlusconi needed League voters to bolster his own northern presence and so stop the alternative left or centrist coalitions making advances in that crucial battleground. Such electoral pragmatism is put into sharp relief when contrasted to the SNP's campaign for the May Regional elections, which saw an explicit attempt to replace the Labour party as the choice of working-class Scots, a line now continued by Alex Salmond's incessant use of the epithet 'Tory Blair' for the new Labour leader. It is a strategy highlighted in the following SNP Regional election leaflet:

Labour a once great political party, founded by women and men of principle and compassion, dedicated to changing society, is now transformed into a sterile electoral machine, with no vision, abandoning principles for the sake of power, yet delivering nothing for Scotland.

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The Scottish National Party then is explicitly trying to replace Labour in its Scottish heartlands by accusing it of anglicising itself away. It is a long-term policy which runs the perennial risk of simply not succeeding given Labour's entrenchment in the Central Belt and the renewed British-wide optimism brought by Labour's new leadership team (since John Smith's death membership has risen by 10,000 according to a report in **The Independent** (9 August 1994)). At the point of writing the SNP have 3 of Scotland's 72 MPs, 2 of its 8 MEPs and 73 of the 453 regional councillors. The party has certainly been in the media spotlight since its 32.6% in the European elections (only 28% in the non-Northern seats where Labour remain firmly entrenched). It remains very far, however, from delivering substantive change for Scotland that could compare with the substantial autonomy demands which the League have made the price for their participation in and continued

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support of the Berlusconi-led government and which they are well placed to deliver having won the important battle for the Interior Ministry. There was no hiding the League's antagonism to *Forza Italia* in the election campaign, but their short-term electoral pragmatism was always to the fore, highlighted in the following pronouncement by Bossi distributed at the League's closing election rally in Milan on 25th March 1994:

I decided to construct the 'pole of liberty' a few months ago when there was a complex operation afoot to destroy the League...*Forza Italia*, a movement born to destroy us, has been transformed into a useful ally. This has entailed some sacrifice, it is true. In some seats Berlusconi has presented men recycled from the old regime, demonstrating what we have known all along, that his political project aims at recycling, not at change. But, on the whole, we have put Berlusconi's movement into a straight-jacket, we have manoeuvred him into an electoral accord which will give him only a minority of deputies and senators.

That such pragmatism reaped large political reward is shown by the election results summarised below in table 1 (vote share is reconstructed from **La Repubblica** (30 March 1994) and final seat numbers come from **La Repubblica** (14 April 1994)).

These figures are deliberately presented in descending order of seats gained rather than in the three 'poles' of aggregated results, for this highlights the pragmatic nature of the League's triumph. The most remarkable aspect of its ascent to power and possible federalisation of the Italian state was its achievement without any substantial electoral advance. In an election which saw the vote share of the parties which had made up yet another *pentapartito* (five-party) government in 1992 fall from 55% to the 15.7% gained by the centrist rump Popular Party and Segni's Pact for Italy, the League merely consolidated its vote of two years ago. Indeed in the proportional part of the ballot which was retained for a quarter of the seats it dropped 0.3% from the 8.7% it had gained in the fully proportional system two years ago. Its 8.4% was only fifth behind *Forza Italia*, the leftist PDS, the National Alliance and the rump of the former Christian Democrat left, the Italian Popular Party. The League's advance then came through an exploitation to the full of the new first-past-the-post Italian voting system used for the other three-quarters of the seats. It must be seen as a tactical triumph for Umberto Bossi and his party.

**Table 1**

**1994 Italian Election Results (Chamber of Deputies)**

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Party	Total Seats	Seats from Single-Member Constituencies.	Seats from PR Ballot	% Vote in PR Ballot
Northern League	122	111	11	8.4
Dem Left (PDS)	115	77	38	20.4
Nat Alliance (AN)	109	86	23	13.5
<i>Forza Italia</i>	97	67	30	21.0
Comm Refoundation	40	29	11	6.0
Popular Party (PPI)	33	4	29	11.1
Centrist Christ (CCD)	32	32	-	-
Dem Alliance (AD)	17	17	-	1.2
Socialist Party (PSI)	15	15	-	2.2
Segni's Pact for Italy	13	-	13	4.6
Greens	11	11	-	2.7
Pannella's List	6	6	-	3.5
Network (La Rete)	6	6	-	1.9
Christian Socialists	6	6	-	-
Others	5	5	-	3.5

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Whilst Berlusconi and Fini stole the headlines, Bossi manoeuvred a party with a double-figure vote in only three of Italy's twenty regions in 1992, right to the heart of the Italian polity. Through his electoral alliance with *Forza Italia*, which concurrently had an electoral agreement with the National Alliance in the non-Northern regions, Bossi virtually guaranteed a clean-sweep of the north. At the same time he left himself free for post-election negotiations by maintaining his distance from both Fini ('They are the mafia, we are the wind from the North' (**La Repubblica** 7 March 1994)) and,

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vitality, Berlusconi ('It must be absolutely clear that between the League and Berlusconi there is a gulf of difference' (**La Repubblica** 10 March 1994)) throughout the campaign. The League was clearly committed to federalism and economic liberalism, and whilst the others portrayed themselves as rightist fighters against the dangerous leftist *progressisti*, the League chose to concentrate on an individualist message with its predominant theme of freeing the reins of the state for the benefit of all Northern citizens. It was a victory born of supreme political pragmatism, reflecting a history which has seen the various regional leagues of Northern Italy move from political obscurity to the centre of Italian power and to the threshold of decentralisation in little over a decade.

Since the election there have been the predicted difficulties of three very different coalition partners working together in Rome, including a fist-fight between a League and a *Forza* deputy over Berlusconi's decree on *tangenti* suspects, but the government has endured. Now with the Prime Minister's honeymoon period ended by his clash with the judiciary, a new election is less likely with the coalition partners standing to lose to a left re-emerging under a new more centrist leader, Massimo D'Alema, who seems ready to finally jettison the albatross of the hard-line Communist Refoundation and to ally with the smaller parties to his right. The League has so far won its short-term gamble and has occupied a strained position both inside and openly critical of the government. The roulette-like nature of its tactics was typified in the recent stand-off and subsequent reconciliation between Bossi and Berlusconi over the lira crisis. Their symbolic 5am shared bowl of pasta was dubbed 'spaghetti diplomacy' in **La Repubblica** (14 August 1994) which continued: 'It does not seem that a peace accord has been reached, merely a truce until the next argument.'

What is the relevance of such classic political pragmatism in the Scottish context? The SNP undoubtedly operates in a different political context to that of the League, with far more stability in the partisan make-up and since 1979 with the bitter lesson that short-term co-operation with rivals may bring no long-term reward. Also as a by-product of that year's referendum failure, it has faced electoral competitors wearing many of the same clothes - witness Tony Blair's recent pledge to have a Scottish parliament operational within a year, and the federalist Liberal Democrats. However, the SNP is not pre-determined not to co-operate with other parties in the Scottish electoral market. It was going to participate in the pre-1992 Scottish Constitutional Convention before deciding on the isolationist long-term road to 'Independence in Europe'. By coincidence, the first partisan moves to separation in the North of Italy also occurred in the year of Scotland's

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referendum 1979, and it is very instructive to sketch out a brief history of the League from that point.

#### **A DECADE OF CHANGE**

The first notable study of the *leghe* (the collective term for the autonomous leagues in different regions) came with Renato Mannheimer's 1991 study of the Lombard League. The essays focused on the gestation and growth of the various *leghe* and the motives of the various *leghisti* (the collective name for League voters). Some of the contributors have since been accused of searching for solutions which characterised these new movements as unequivocally on the right and racist, but the true complexity of the phenomenon was well captured by Mannheimer (1991, p.124) himself:

The 'leghista' is...a figure too heterogeneous to be described in an unequivocal way. In reality one leghista does not exist, there are several such figures, and for each the prevalent characteristics can be elucidated, depending on the different grade of commitment to the League

This theme of diversity is one which begs immediate comparison with the SNP's heterogeneous make-up, and was picked up by a contributor to the above study, Ilvo Diamanti, who develops his typology of *leghisti* in his 1993 book. He highlights the different phases in the short history of the leagues which act as useful empirical evidence for its electoral pragmatism.

The initial breakthrough came in the Veneto region at the 1983 election, and was based on the linguistic and cultural revivals of the 1970s playing on dialect and ethnicity as a solution to contemporary problems. However the limited electoral appeal of such an approach was soon recognised and jettisoned from the mid-1980s as the focus moved to Lombardy and explicitly onto the Lombard League's leader, Umberto Bossi. He played on the idea of the North as a community of interests under constant threat from 'outside' as personified in the Southerner and then the immigrant. It was a message put across in an unorthodox fashion with Bossi moving from the Venetian use of dialect, to a more general Italian of the streets, such as the now infamous Italian double play of 'The League has a hard-on!'. League activists were to be found in bars and football terraces, taking every opportunity to distance themselves from the traditional parties and their mediums, as Diamanti makes clear (1993, p.57):

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From the idea of territory as the source of historical identity, with the region as nation, the Lombard League, and especially its leader Umberto Bossi, substituted the idea of territory as the centre of an identity founded on interests, a community with great traditions and productive capacity, constrained by its subordination to the logic of the state and the parties.

The league then benefited at the start of the 1990s from the crises of the existing political system. First the collapse of the rival communist and Christian Democrat subcultures was accelerated by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Then all political parties of the first Republic became discredited as plausible instruments of change by the wide-spreading tentacles of the *tangentopoli* corruption scandals where government funds were used to line partisan coffers. The League stepped into the ensuing vacuum with a clever concentration in this period on its opposition to the traditional parties and the organs of the state which in many spheres meant the same thing such was the overlap between the two. Its reward came with spectacular advances across the North in the 1992 general election. The League consolidated its base in the regions of Lombardy, the Veneto and Piedmont. However it also made significant advances in Friuli Venezia-Giulia and the traditionally 'red' region of Emilia-Romagna. The results in the different regions are displayed in table 2 (the first two columns from a forthcoming article by Marco Maraffi and the third from the PR results reported in **La Repubblica** (30 March 1994)).

After 1992 the economic crises of the budget deficit and soaring state expenditure were brought into sharp focus by the convergence criteria for monetary union laid down in the Maastricht treaty, thus adding to ongoing political crises. In the North this caused anger at the possibility that the South would prevent Italy from entering the European fast-track. The League was thrust to the forefront of political renovation, and had to rid itself of its opposition tag and present itself as a force for change of the whole political system. It accomplished this task by focusing tirelessly on the need for fundamental institutional and economic reforms, which it saw as best achieved through the three highly-devolved macro-regions proposed by its intellectual mentor, Gianfranco Miglio (who since the March election has severed his links with Bossi because of his perception that the latter prefers power over principle).

For Diamanti this further shift in stance to a party of neo-liberal, territorial renovation presented the League with considerable problems of holding together the consensus it had assembled up to that point. However, as table 2 shows, the League did hold on to a stable number of voters in the recent March election (markedly improving in the Veneto and holding fairly

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constant elsewhere, except in Emilia-Romagna which saw the leftist coalition's high point). This result was achieved despite the significant entry of a new media-powered force for innovation in the shape of Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*. Sensing a direct confrontation between the League and Berlusconi's movement as vehicles for renewal, Bossi chose the path of coalition outlined earlier. However, warning against any complacency came in the June European election when all parties ran on their own in a PR election which saw Berlusconi prove his electoral potential throughout Italy with 30.6% of the vote nation-wide (Italy is divided into five large Euro-constituencies). The League meanwhile suffered its first substantial electoral set-back since its rise to prominence, falling to 6.6%. Subsequent opinion polls have shown Fini's National Alliance as the chief beneficiary of Berlusconi's troubles over *tangentopoli*, *Fininvest*, and most recently his showing of pro-government adverts on both state and his own private television.

**Table 2**

**Regional Distribution of Northern League Support**

Regions	1990 (Regional)		1992 (General)		1994 (General)	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
Lombardy	1,183,493	68.9	1,497,600	44.1	1,460,844	44.9
Veneto	180,676	10.5	575,814	16.9	701,801	21.6
Piedmont	148,450	8.6	505,055	14.9	484,737	14.9
Emilia-Romagna	85,379	5.0	292,962	8.6	195,192	6.0
Liguria	71,311	4.1	175,973	5.2	140,132	4.3
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	-	-	137,167	4.0	150,272	4.6
Tuscany	20,657	1.2	80,557	2.4	56,476	1.7
Trentino-Alto Adige	-	-	56,527	1.7	47,572	1.5
Other regions	28,779	1.7	73,729	2.2	13,812	0.5

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TOTAL	1,718,745	100.0	3,395,384	100.0	3,250,838	100.0
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In the decade since the Venetian League's first emergence, the various leagues have displayed a large capacity for political pragmatism, shaping their message to the prevailing political climate; further adjustments in the League's stance over the next few months are very likely. Vitality, in increasing their vote over this period, they have attracted different voters for different reasons without alienating those already committed - the curse of the single-issue, protest groups which Italy saw a spate of in the 80s. Moreover the League, by the very novelty of its presence in the political market and its new methods of communication, has helped to contribute to the electoral fluidity which has benefited it, for Diamanti (1993, p.85):

The Northern League appears..as a political entrepreneur of the crisis, which reflects and at the same time produces the feelings and resentments of wide sectors of the Northern social landscape, thus translating into consensus the many reasons and directions of dissensus distilled through the eighties and nineties

**DIFFERENT 'LEGHISTI', DIFFERENT MOTIVES**

Who, then, votes for the League? This simple question has been the largest cause of controversy in the Italian literature on the phenomenon, and several competing answers arose to the question of where the *leghe* gained most of their adherents from. The first of these identified the League as an anti-immigration, racist party such as the French Front National or German Republikaner Party, or as a single-issue protest party such as the Greens, but these seem to have stemmed more from academic prejudice than empirical evidence. More substantively the League was portrayed as the beneficiary of the drastic contractions in the vote of the Christian Democrat (DC) party. The main source of evidence for this contention came from the Veneto, a former bedrock of the *zone bianche* ('white zones') which were the strongest areas of the Catholic subculture. This is an argument forged by Italian and British commentators (Natale (1991) and Newell (1993)) alike, but it fails to cross the necessary empirical hurdles, with the DC element largest only as a function of its own pre-eminent position. The most recent data also damages

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the projection of the leagues as protest movements against only the established parties which would logically involve the gaining a large majority of votes from the *pentapartiti* or five parties who formed the basis of the various governments over the last decade of the First Republic.

The most convincing evidence that none of the above theories works comes in the analysis of voter movements between the 1987 and 1992 general elections cited by Piergiorgio Corbetta. He uses the data from the 4,659 interviews of the DOXA exit-poll supplemented by the 716 telephone interviews carried out by the Cattaneo Institute in the two days after 5 April 1992, both asking the two simple questions 'How did you vote this time?' and 'How did you vote last time?'. The results obtained are very significant, and are reproduced in Table 3 below (modified from Tables 2 & 3 in Corbetta (1993, p.240)).

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**Table 3**

**Electoral Movement to the League from 1987 to 1992**

	Number of Voters	%
Proletarian Democracy (DP)	1	0.3
Communist (PCI)	65	18.5
Socialist (PSI)	44	12.5
Social-Democratic (PSDI)	13	3.7
Republican (PRI)	19	5.4
Christian Democratic (DC)	89	25.4
Liberal (PLI)	5	1.4
Italian Social Movement (MSI)	23	6.6
Radical (Radicali)	12	3.4
Greens (Verdi)	14	4.0
Autonomists (separate from LN)	13	3.7
Northern League (Lega Nord)	54	15.1

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TOTAL	352	100.0
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With reservations as to the size of the sample, these results indicate several salient factors. They are a testament to the remarkable growth of the league phenomenon in five years; moreover, of the 54 who voted for the League in 1987 only 10 did not do so in 1992, giving 84% voter stability in an election in which the average was only 68%. Most importantly the table shows the diversity of parties from which the Northern League garnered its votes, indeed these span the traditional left-right spectrum from former communists to neo-fascists. Significantly, the gaining of votes from the Christian Democrat and Communist parties is offset by adherents from such diverse groups as the neo-fascist MSI and the protest Greens, and the 25% gained from the DC was actually less than if the League had attracted voters from all parties in proportion to their vote-share. These findings are confirmed by the tensions during the 1994 campaign caused by the alliance with Berlusconi, the discontent with him summed up thus by one *leghista* interviewed : 'Because he is on the right, whilst I, if I was not a *leghista*, would be on the left' (**La Repubblica** 27 February 1994). Since the election, Bossi has issued several veiled threats regarding the League's ability to ally with the centre and even the left in response to Berlusconi's talk of returning to the electorate.

The simple pattern is that there is no simple pattern. Corbetta extends his analysis to testing the dominant theses of partisan make-up of the leagues through log-linear analysis. He finds the model with most statistical significance is one employing the traditional left-right spectrum but which situates the League at a point outside it, equidistant from all parties. It simply cannot be pinned down on the traditional partisan spectrum, given the flows outlined above. Thus the Northern League's 1992 electoral performance comprises

A vote so undifferentiated, so uniformly distributed across the partisan arc, that has at its root either a new cleavage which traverses all the parties at the same time, a cleavage which has up till now remained latent in society and moreover unexplored in the programmes of the other parties, ..or it is the product of the moulting of the system. (Corbetta 1993, p.248)

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For Corbetta it is this last factor which possesses the chief explanatory power for the League's rise. They have been the beneficiaries of a flaking of the system not along any ideological or social schism, but rather from exasperation with and antagonism toward the traditional parties and organs of the state. He dismisses the ability of neo-regionalism to serve as a new cross-party cleavage, describing the 'northism' of the Northern League as a 'rhetorical invention'.

However, this latter claim is based on the author's own assertion and may be challenged by empirical data cited by Diamanti. The attitudes summarised in table 4 come from a survey conducted by the Poster Institute from December 1992-January 1993 of 660 voters equally distributed between Lombardy and the Veneto, of whom 145 declared themselves close to the Lombard or Venetian Leagues respectively. The interviewees were asked about their feelings of belonging to various regional spheres (Diamanti, 1993, Table 9, p.100).

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**Table 4**

**Feelings of Territorial Belonging in Lombardy and the Veneto (%)**

Feel closest to..	All	'Leghisti'	'Lombardi'	'Veneti'
Local town/Commune	21	18	20	16
Province/Region	24	28	29	27
North	9	22	15	30
Italy	23	9	13	3
Europe/World	12	23	23	23

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Whilst one must again be wary of the size of the sample, there are several features revealed by the table. Most noticeable is the fact that only 9% of League voters feel their identity closest to Italy, compared with 23% of all voters, itself a noteworthy figure for a nation which has been unified for over a century. This single-figure response is reminiscent of the small numbers of SNP voters who view themselves as more British than Scottish (although one must note the different emphasis created in the standard Scottish wording of

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more 'x' than 'y'). Meanwhile 50% of all *leghisti* view themselves as belonging either to their region or to the North, a proportion which is sufficient to challenge Corbetta's total dismissal of regional identity as a possible new cleavage cutting across the old Italian schisms. In this sphere one must note the considerable internal differences which characterise the Northern League, with Venetians twice as likely to feel 'northern' as their Lombard counterparts whilst only three out of a hundred Venetian League sympathisers feels their greatest affinity to Italy. These differences serve to remind one again of the heterogeneity of the league phenomenon, and Diamanti posits that they spring in part from the different historical trajectories earlier outlined and indeed from the different histories of many of Italy's regions.

Further data from this same Poster Institute survey shows that the previous male bias of League supporters has waned, there now being no significant gender imbalance, but there is still a slight trend for *leghisti* to belong to younger age cohorts and to lack advanced educational qualifications, with league supporters only half as likely as the general public to have a university degree. In general, the picture presented is of an electorate becoming 'normal'. The *leghisti* do not inhabit some kind of quasi-subcultural ghetto. Mirroring the complexity of their former votes and their attitudes to identity, the League's sociological make-up can be seen to be anything but simplistic; this caused Renato Mannheimer (1993, p.271) to conclude that:

As has been underlined in the past, the choice of voting for the League is not reducible to one single characteristic, but is determined by the simultaneous marriage of a series of attachments, characteristics and orientations

The League then has managed to interweave many different values into a coherent political message. It is not simply an ethno-regionalist party, nor a protest party, nor an anti-system party; rather it is all of these things and more, and it manages to combine these different facets in an inclusionist manner. It has managed to turn its geographical limitations it faced into a powerful electoral asset. The Northern League stands as the one party to successfully bridge the gap between the last years of the First Republic and the first years of its successor. Through its pragmatism and adaption it now is in a position to answer the desires of those Italian citizens who want greater autonomy for the North. Vitally these citizens do not represent a very closeted, unrepresentative group; they mirror closely the broad cross-section of Scots who also desire greater autonomy.

## **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

This brief account of the history of the Italian Northern League may at first glance, however, seem to bear little relevance in a Scottish context. After all, Italian politics is renowned for its difference and instability, whereas all Scottish political players have decades of entrenched history behind them. Moreover the jury is still out on the 1994 Italian election which even more than its predecessor in 1992 deserves the description of 'earthquake'. It seems likely that the election has provided the death-knell of the First Republic, but whether Silvio Berlusconi's ramshackle coalition enacts the fundamental constitutional and economic reforms promised in the campaign remains open to much conjecture. After *Forza Italia's* golden six months Berlusconi has lost his Midas touch with his recent climb down over *tangenti* suspects held without trial smacking of old-style cronyism, particularly as his long-term cohort, Bettino Craxi, has been sentenced in absentia, and Berlusconi's brother, Paolo, now seems likely to face the same fate. These difficulties have been manna to Umberto Bossi and he has stepped up his criticisms of the Prime Minister's stalling over his *Fininvest* business and media interests. However, the months of government have not been plain sailing for the League, with the resignation of Miglio and the development of the first substantial anti-Bossi faction (recently quashed in an internal election in the Veneto). The reconciliation between League and *Forza* over the lira crisis may be unconvincing, but it is a mutual recognition that it is these two parties which now stand to lose most in new elections because the National Alliance now attracts almost 20% in the most recent polls.

Overshadowing all these machinations, however, is the League's very presence at the crux of Italian power in terms of seats won both in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Umberto Bossi and his Northern League proved the best poker players in the novel, hybrid election system and they have continued to play their hand well, if on some occasions risking the loss of all, as all habitual gamblers do. It is this supreme pragmatism without the compromise of partisan identity which should provide food for Scottish thought. The success of the League is such that no party or movement which places autonomy demands at the top of their agenda can afford to ignore it. Like the *Parti Quebecois* in Canada or the Catalan *Convergencia i Unio* in Spain before it, the Italian Northern League has succeeded in penetrating the central echelons of policy-making in a very short period of time, and so has increased the possibility of realising their agenda, whilst Scotland has endured only fifteen years of frustrated hopes and wasted votes.

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What then are the similarities? Neither the SNP nor the Northern League campaign on ethnic lines. The distancing from the Settler Watch and Scotland Watch movements by the SNP leadership is the most recent confirmation of that party's avoidance of any racial definition of 'Scottishness'. Instead with 8.3% of English-born voters in Scotland supporting it (Dickson 1994), it should be seen more as a representative of 'Scottish' interests and so nearer to a definition involving all those resident in Scotland and encompassing a wide range of self-definitions interwoven in a community of interests (Paterson 1993). This mirrors the history of the Italian leagues' moving from the Venetian League's espousal of an ethnic Venetian-only nation to the concept of the 'North' as a diverse area of Italy whose economic and social interests were being harmed by Roman centralism and corruption.

It is true that elements of the League's supporters are more racist than its leadership. This prejudice manifests itself most against Southern Italians; immigrants from other countries can be assimilated, whereas those from the South are forever tarred with *mafiosita*, a catch-all term for backwardness, corruption and laziness. In contrast, the myth of Northern identity has been founded on a strong work ethic, entrepreneurship, solidarity and law-abidance. Like the Scottish conception of its difference in terms of community and associated values, the League's myth of identity has a considerable empirical base, for Anna Bull:

It is not simply a question of the myth of the productive and efficient Northerners against the parasitic and inefficient Southerners. The cultural characteristics upon which the League erected the myth of Lombard ethnicity have often been identified by both economists and sociologists as belonging to a specific type of economy and society, known variably as diffused entrepreneurship, localised industry or the 'Third Italy'

The League's economic programme is thus heavily skewed to small and medium-sized firms. If ethnicity is defined on cultural rather than strict biological terms, then the League is an ethnic party. However, to almost the same extent as the SNP, this cultural ethnicity is interwoven with conceptions of civil society. Its definition is complex and shifting, meaning the League has nothing to do with the revival of simplistically nationalist far-right parties: in Italy that is the province of the National Alliance.

Moreover both the SNP and the League have clearly defined territorial spheres. There is no lingering dispute about Cumbria or Northumberland

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which might add geographical militancy to the SNP's platform. In Italy it is the neo-fascist National Alliance who want to re-negotiate Italy's border with Slovenia. The League's ambit is clearly defined in its own macro-regional proposals, heavily reliant, like the SNP, on the institutions and opportunities of the European Union as a springboard to political clout and economic prosperity.

The final and crucial similarity comes in the nature of the demands of both parties. Both focus the largest portion of their discontent on bankrupt political centres - London and Rome. Decisions taken there are perceived to be out of touch with 'northern' realities and are, at times, portrayed as deliberately against the interests of their respective areas (witness the bogeymen of English Tories, or southern Christian Democrats recycled in *Forza Italia*). In this sense both are expressions of the failure of their respective nation-states to answer the demands of all their citizens. They represent manifestations that both the British and Italian 'nationalist' projects have failed for, at least, substantial minorities of their populations. Accommodation from the centre has been supplanted by regional demands for democracy and accountability.

In this respect the recent **Concise History of Italy** by Christopher Duggan provides very interesting reading with its central thesis of the difficulties which faced Italian rulers in binding to the new Italian nation a population whose lives had always centred around local communities:

Since its creation in 1861, Italy has struggled to develop an effective political system and a secure sense of national identity. This concise history... looks in particular at the difficulties Italy has faced during the last two centuries in *forging* a nation state [my italics]

Duggan's work then bears a noteworthy resemblance to Linda Colley's recent history **Britons - Forging the Nation**. Both assess the attempts to unify diverse peoples into a single nation in terms of the manifest current failure of the project. In Britain the bonds of war with France, expanding Empire, anti-Catholicism and economic prosperity have waned and the substantial de facto devolution of powers from London has been undercut by Thatcher's governments. In Italy meanwhile the strongest unifying gel came as a reaction to the failed fascist project of integration, but the bond of anti-fascism was itself undermined by the Christian Democrat penetration of the state and the exclusion from the First Republic of the entire communist subculture. The spectacular collapse of the First Republic in scandal was merely the nadir of a long downward slide. The emergence of the Northern League as an

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enduring product of this decline is symptomatic of severe limitations in the Italian nationalist project, and table 4 above suggests that less than a quarter of the nation's northern citizens stress their 'Italianness':

[The League's] growth..bore witness to the fact that Italy had yet to find a secure identity. Talk of greater regional autonomy, federalism and even the secession of the North from the South, showed that a hundred and thirty years of unity had failed to produce agreement as to what the Italian nation was or should be. (Duggan 1994, p.294)

However, this is where the similarities end and the differences become crucial in determining the differing successes of the two parties' reformist projects. The first major difference concerns presentation and communication. The League has carved out a very definite space for itself through its use of very earthy slogans in unusual places, such as the pre-election rally outside the San Siro before an AC Milan-Inter Milan derby, supplemented by Bossi's now famous one-line put-downs (Allievi 1992). The SNP meanwhile remains mired in 'politics as usual', appearing no different from the other three major parties in the cheap shots it makes at its rivals and lacking the charismatic leadership which causes thousands of *leghisti* to flock to hear Bossi speak. Whilst the League is seen as a force of renovation, the SNP, now with a substantial political presence of nearly three decades, too often merges into the norms of political debate as was shown all too clearly in the Monklands by-election campaign when the SNP dropped any explicit autonomist rhetoric for a straight dog-fight with Labour in its heartlands.

This leads to the second crucial difference between the two parties - the contrast between the League's pragmatism and the SNP's fundamentalism. The story of the League outlined in the preceding pages is one of political opportunism in which it has readjusted its message and demands to fit those prevalent in its electorate. It has also maximised its number of seats and, therefore, its bargaining power in the new Italian parliament by being unafraid to enter into electoral alliance with parties with whom it may not have that much in common. To many, these will be seen as unsavoury political tactics, somehow beneath the great purity of Scottish nationalism. But the stark fact is that in less than a decade of existence Umberto Bossi's party is playing a major role in the new Italian government and may well oversee a radical decentralisation of the Italian state. Without a doubt some of the League's tactics have been dubious and they continue to play a dangerous game by criticising so often a government of which they are an integral part, but they have performed the primary role of any political party by actually gaining power to answer the demands of its electorate. Only from

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the seat of power can any sort of change be delivered - the League has that chance, the SNP does not.

### **LESSONS FOR SCOTLAND**

What the League has achieved is not the full independence which the SNP seek, but most northern Italians do not desire such a change. Nor do most Scots. Herein lies the crucial dilemma facing the SNP as it attempts to deliver substantial change. Any partisan nationalist reading this assessment will object that the Northern League faces no political opponent like the Scottish Labour Party. Asking the SNP to ally to its most virulent rival would be like asking the League to ally to the old Christian Democrat Party - the very antithesis of what they stand for. This analysis however is far from understanding the dynamic of the 1994 Italian election and its aftermath - the League allied itself with other parties precisely because they represented beliefs opposed to some of the League's; these opponents were indeed widely seen to be recycled from the old Christian Democrats. It wished to rein them in, and, by its superior playing of the new electoral system which rewards geographical concentration, it won this encounter.

In this context the SNP's fundamentalism, which has been dominant over any gradualist strand since the party's withdrawal from the pre-1992 Constitutional Convention, can be seen as not meeting the demands of the people whom the party supposedly serves. More Scots want a devolved parliament within the United Kingdom than full independence, and so the Labour Party's policy stance is more in tune with the electorate. That said there is an argument advanced persuasively by Richard Finlay in his recent book on the genesis of the SNP that their presence is necessary as a pressure group to keep the onus on the other parties. Finlay explains their fear of the devolution option as having deep historical roots, but it is my contention that the SNP has now played the long game for too long. It is waiting for Scots to come to its creed, rather than reacting to their desires for autonomy now by working for a Scottish parliament now. It could then exploit what would be a far more prominent and powerful position as the probable opposition within that body to further the case for outright independence, as Kenny Farquharson highlighted recently in **Scotland on Sunday**:

...being the second biggest party in a devolved Scottish parliament could be the making of the SNP. For a start it would give a huge increase in the number of full-time, fully-paid politicians it has at its disposal. This in turn would help it make the transition from a one-issue pressure group to

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a fully-fledged political party...the Nationalists need to travel further before they can confidently match Labour for resources and the ability to form coherent policy. At present the SNP has to compensate by trying to outdo Labour in passion and commitment.

The challenge then for the SNP is to emulate the Italian Northern League in taming the beast which threatens to slay it. Fundamentalists will point to the difficulties of competing in an electoral market dominated by a Labour Party sporting a neo-nationalist mantle. These difficulties are no more severe than those faced by the League against the populist renovation of *Forza Italia*; yet the League turned Berlusconi's entry to the advantage of an autonomous North by meeting an obvious rival head-on. Each week seems to bring a different answer to the question of whether the League has succeeded or not, and the real beneficiary of Bossi and Berlusconi's squabbles has been Fini and his National Alliance. Its critics can find much ammunition to fuel their perennial suggestion that the League's bubble is about to burst. However, in its five years of existence the Northern League has consistently advanced and now, unlike the much older SNP, stands just one step away from its main goal. Thus, notwithstanding the internal politics necessary to maintain the governing coalition, the League to observers from similar parties abroad must represent a success story to be emulated.

The problems facing the British political system may not be quite so open, but are in many ways as fundamental as those of Italy. In Scotland there is a crisis of legitimacy similar to that of northern Italy, with water privatisation, local government reform and the ongoing tragedy of Rosyth its most recent totems. Both Italy and the United Kingdom are suffering very severe tremors to their nationalist projects. Yet, within Scotland, there is no political force with the necessary vision to unite the various players striving for greater democratic autonomy. Partisan pride and political intransigence consistently stall the desire of a majority of Scotland's citizens to have their own parliament.

The Northern League has in its short history illustrated how malaise with the central state can be combined with a clear identity to create a viable and successful political force attracting adherents from all parts of the old political spectrum. In this they approach what Andrew Marr described at the seminar to mark the sixtieth birthday of the SNP as a 'Scottish Parliament Supporters Club' which would ask for an explicit one-off pragmatic vote to remedy Scotland's glaring democratic deficit. Once such democratic autonomy is gained all Scots could vote their conscience, but this state cannot be achieved without political pragmatism from all opposition parties. Now,

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after fifteen continuous years of Conservative rule, the challenge to the parties to properly represent and serve the Scottish people is clearer than ever. It is time to swallow all fundamentalist pride, to engage in the short game and to put the Scottish people to the fore by giving them the pragmatic advice to hold their noses and vote.

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