



## To Reform Italy, Renzi Should Resign

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By Pierpaolo Barbieri

When Barack Obama feted Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi at the president's final state dinner last month, he said in a toast that Mr. Renzi "should hang around for a while no matter what." He was referring to his guest's promise to resign should he lose a constitutional referendum on Dec. 4. Far from heeding Mr. Obama's advice, however, Mr. Renzi should resign anyway, regardless of the referendum's outcome.

In light of recent results in Britain and Colombia, it seems almost foolhardy that any government would risk another referendum during this, the year of the protest vote. Yet Mr. Renzi had no choice: The political reforms he initiated in 2014 passed through Parliament on such narrow margins that they demanded a plebiscite.

The proposed amendment is straightforward: It would simplify Italy's Byzantine legislative process by making the Senate a consultative rather than a legislative body, ending the "perfect bicameralism" of the postfascist Italian republic.

Today, both houses must pass the same version of a bill before it be-

comes law, and so there is often significant back and forth between the two chambers of Parliament on the way to legislation. Although plenty of bills are still passed this way, a prime minister's government requires the confidence of both chambers simultaneously. This has contributed to the legendary instability of Italy's postwar cabinets, with more than 60 governments since the 1945 creation of the Italian republic. Such a system makes achieving the kinds of reforms Italy needs extremely difficult.

The constitutional reform's opponents are many, and make for strange bedfellows. They include respected senators who voted in favor of these very reforms in Parliament (Mario Monti); populists who decry the exorbitant, corrupt cost of Italian government (Beppe Grillo); and even some of Mr. Renzi's own party members who in the past led commissions to enact analogous constitutional changes (Massimo D'Alema). What unites them all isn't a dislike of the ballot proposal but rather a profound dislike of Mr. Renzi.

No doubt the brash young reformist is an acquired taste. But the labor, economic and judicial reforms his government has passed since coming to power have been the closest Italy

has come to deep structural change made by a popular government in decades. In many ways they are reminiscent of the Agenda 2010 program that turned Germany from the "sick man of Europe" in 2004 into the economic powerhouse it is today.

### Win or lose in December's referendum, the prime minister should remind voters he's worth keeping.

Mr. Renzi's critics may carp, but none of them could muster an alternative majority capable of delivering reform on this scale. No wonder Italy's once-mighty trade unions are trying to use this referendum to get rid of him and preserve the status quo.

Italy needs Mr. Renzi. With the center-right in disarray and the center-left jealous of his appeal, the only governing alternative might be the 5 Star Movement started by Mr. Grillo, a former comedian. It is a common Anglo-American misconception that the 5 Star Movement is anti-euro; few if any politicians in

Italy are. Yet the 5 Star Movement openly eschews government experience. Its parliamentarians excel at Facebook, not law making. The mess they have made of the mayoralty in Rome since their takeover in June is a reminder that government is no job for amateurs.

Europe also needs Mr. Renzi. At the most recent elections to the European Parliament, he led his party to a larger share of the vote than Angela Merkel, giving him a legitimacy to stand up to Germany that France's François Hollande has never had and Mr. Hollande's predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, never used. Mr. Renzi is a constructive pro-European who can criticize Germany for its resistance to the deeper federalization that the Continent needs for the monetary union to be sustainable.

Which, paradoxically, is why Mr. Renzi should announce his intent to resign no matter the referendum outcome. He's more important for Italy, both at home and abroad, than voters realize. Only by upping the stakes can he both depersonalize the referendum and reveal the vacuity of his opponents' positions.

By divorcing his own political future from the constitutional changes Italy needs, Mr. Renzi

would also crystallize for voters the choice between reform and stasis. In doing so, he would also significantly increase the odds of a referendum victory.

Upon his resignation, Mr. Renzi's opponents could try their hand at forming a government. Particularly if the reforms pass the referendum, an anti-Renzi majority is unlikely. Should elections be called, Mr. Renzi would likely emerge as the most-voted alternative. This would in turn give his reformism a clear, popular mandate.

Most foreign observers look ahead to Dec. 4 with trepidation, fearing another referendum disaster and the end of reformism in Italy. That need not be so. By making it clear that he intends to resign regardless of the result, Mr. Renzi can undermine his critics and ultimately strengthen his own position. In America, a president gets to "hang around for a while" in only one way: by winning a second term. For a reformist prime minister in Italy to hang around, he needs—temporarily—to quit.

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