Democrats in decline

MODENA

The ruling party is struggling as the election nears

They like their food in Modena, a city on the foggy flatlands south of the River Po that gave the world the Ferrari, Luciano Pavarotti and a restaurant, the Osteria Francescana, that was voted the best in Europe last year. As people gathered for a fundraising dinner in the suburb of San Damaso, a delectable aroma wafted through the sports hall where it was to be served. And among the pleasures it betokened was the sweet taste of revenge.

The dinner was for a new party, Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal, or LEU), founded last year by politicians who had left Matteo Renzi’s governing, centre-left Democratic Party (PD). Some of the rebels objected to his business-friendly policies; others complained of his ruthless marginalisation of the party’s old guard, including the night’s main speaker, Pier Luigi Bersani, who led the PD until 2013. Mr Bersani insists his differences with Mr Renzi are political. “He has taken the PD—my PD—out of its roots, and taken it elsewhere,” he says as he waits to take the platform.

The PD traces those roots to the once mighty Italian Communist Party (PCI), which for almost 40 years was the main opposition party to the now-defunct Christian Democrats. A merger between those, like Mr Bersani, who belonged to the PCI and a smaller group of progressives who left it as it imploded, including Mr Renzi, became the PD. Proclaiming himself il rottamatore (“the demolition man”), Mr Renzi has sidelined PD worthies of all stripes, but particularly ex-communists. The list of candidates for Italy’s general election which he unveiled on January 31st showed that he had set aside around 80% of winnable seats for his followers.

Mr Bersani claimed, and senior PD officials privately concede, that his successor’s true goal after the vote on March 4th is a coalition with Silvio Berlusconi’s conservative Forza Italia party—if, as looks probable, the PD’s decline seems an odd reward for the dominant partner in a government presiding over a (modest) economic revival after years of crisis. Italy’s GDP grew by an annual 1.7% in the third quarter, spurred by rising exports and, even more encouragingly, rising internal demand and foreign investment. Under Mr Renzi, who resigned as prime minister last year to be succeeded by Paolo Gentiloni, a labour reform was passed that has since helped to create around a million jobs (though too many of them involve short-term contracts).

A senior PD official points to two causes of the party’s decline: a perception that it is not in control of immigration and the split in its ranks, which is as much about Mr Renzi’s autocratic style as about policy. Mr Bersani reckons the LEU could achieve double its current poll showing of 6-7%. But he denies that it is stealing votes from the PD. Its message, he says, wooed disenfranchised supporters of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and voters who would otherwise abstain. But he acknowledges that it also appeals to a third group: “people who have been voting PD without conviction”. There seemed to be plenty in the hall in San Damaso. “Renzi doesn’t listen to anyone,” said Tiziana Bassoli, a housewife. “He has to understand we’re not just going to sit here and listen to him.”

In places like Modena, where the left has been in office continuously since 1946, the disputes that have split the left have divided families, soured friendships and caused Davide Fava, the PD’s provincial secretary, wearied incredulous despair. The surrounding region of Emilia-Romagna was once among the poorest in Europe, he recalls. It grew rich because its inhabitants pulled together in a way that made them naturally receptive to the PCI’s pragmatic version of communism. His grandfather, who had been “happy to eat one meal a day”, had joined other local shopkeepers to form an association that gave them leverage over their suppliers. Today, it is one of Italy’s biggest supermarket chains.

“I have difficulty understanding the reasoning behind this split,” he says. “We are divided over issues that make no sense.” And he scoffs at the claim that Free and Equal will not damage the Democrats. “In the current situation, losing 1% is damaging,” he says. “My fear is that it will let in a right that has already shown itself unable to govern Italy.”

Renzi approaches breaking point

[Image of Renzi speaking]