CHAPTER 6

POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN ITALY

David Hine

Since 1992, Italy has experienced a spectacular increase in judicial exposure and prosecution of political corruption, involving members of parliament, party secretaries, ministers, senior civil servants, local government representatives, and important business and financial groups. In this chapter I will explain the key structural features of recent and contemporary political life that have made the practice of corruption possible on such an extensive scale, and assess the prospects for significant reductions in the future.

I do not quantify or document in detail what has emerged. That will only be possible if and when the great backlog of judicial cases now pending has been cleared by the Italian courts. Moreover, statistical evidence on the extent of political corruption has always been difficult to gather. It may be assumed that even in the 1990s what has emerged at the judicial level represents only a proportion of the problem. Corruption in Italy in recent years appeared to have become quite systematic in certain areas of public life, most notably in that of public-sector contracting, where side payments to political mediators, and via them to parties and individuals, became almost standard practice. For the major governing parties it probably became the principal source of finance. It involved private business interests, the misuse of public-sector resources in the state sector of the economy, and organised crime.

Naturally, the tendency of press reporting to exaggerate matters in which there is great public interest led, during the 1992-4 parliament, to some extravagant estimates of the number of deputies, senators, and local political leaders who were involved in corruption. Public comment frequently ignored the vital distinction between receiving an ‘avviso di garanzia’ – notification that one is under investigation – and being formally charged, let alone being found guilty. Such was the contempt felt for the old political class by the public that an ‘avviso’ could end a career overnight, even though, ironically, the procedure had been introduced as a means of guaranteeing the rights of those being
investigated. Magistrates used the device in a highly public way, combining it with a liberal use of preventative detention (at least for those not enjoying parliamentary immunity), to encourage confessions and plea-bargaining. At the limit it drove individuals to suicide.  

Nevertheless, the balance sheet for 1992-4 does reveal a remarkable state of affairs even in parliament. The Chamber of Deputies held no fewer than 38 hearings dealing with 228 requests from the judiciary for authorisation to suspend parliamentary immunity in order to pursue criminal proceedings against its members, covering in total some 619 supposed crimes. Eventually 111 of the 228 individuals lost their immunity; in 52 cases the request was turned down, and the remaining cases were either withdrawn or failed on technical grounds. Some of the requests approved covered the most serious offences, such as membership of organisations dedicated to organised crime. Though concentrated in the governing parties, the investigations touched others, including those on the left. Alleged crimes covered corruption, conspiracy to corrupt, receipt of stolen goods and, most frequently of all, violation of the law dealing with party finance.

The investigations and subsequent trials have involved some of the most senior politicians and business figures of the last two decades. Two of the longest-serving postwar prime ministers, Bettino Craxi of the Socialist Party and Giulio Andreotti of the Christian Democrats, were both charged, though to date only Craxi’s case has been heard to a conviction. The enormous financial fraud in the public-private Enimont chemicals joint venture, revealed in a trial lasting many months, surprised even hardened observers by its size, audacity, and the many leading politicians and businessmen involved. A further extensive case arose in health-care, where officials and politicians in the Ministry of Health, especially under former health minister Francesco De Lorenzo, slowed down or speeded up drug testing, and added drugs to approved lists for public use on a massive scale, in exchange for personal gain and party funding.

An equally striking feature has been the revelation of the extensive role of party administrators, consultants and middlemen. Commentators on Italian politics have long distinguished between governo and sottogoverno, the latter meaning, quite literally ‘under-’ or ‘hidden’ government. The system of concealed relationships by which agreements were reached on the allocation of patronage in the public sector, contracts were awarded, and individuals found jobs, has always been a key feature of political life, even though largely invisible. The recent investigations and trials have exposed the workings of the system, and