

Renzi's constitutional bridge to nowhere

EUROPE

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Matteo Renzi, Italy's prime minister, raised eyebrows last week when he suggested reviving a project to link the mainland with Sicily by building the world's longest suspension bridge across the Strait of Messina. This multibillion-euro project is associated with Silvio Berlusconi, who promoted it during his spells as prime minister between 1994 and 2011.

The plan was dropped in 2013 on account of its cost, the strait's vulnerability to earthquakes and the danger that mafia clans would fatten themselves on construction contracts. Why does Mr Renzi, who criticised the bridge in 2012 as a waste of money, claim now to see its merits? One answer lies in the risks to his premiership from a referendum on constitutional reforms to be held on December 4. By hinting at the relaunch of a project dear to Mr Berlusconi, the centre-left Mr Renzi aims to reduce the incentive of Berlusconi loyalists and other centre-right forces to topple him in the event he lose the vote.

Whether it makes sense to build a bridge above the waves where, 3,000 years ago, Homer imagined the monsters Scylla and Charybdis attacking Odysseus is a matter for debate. The larger point is that, contrary to Mr Renzi's assertions, the proposed constitutional reforms would do little to improve the quality of government, law-making and politics. The powers of the Senate, the upper house of parliament, would be drastically curtailed in favour

of the lower house. The Senate would no longer be elected by direct, popular vote but would consist mainly of regional councillors and mayors. Its membership would be cut from 315 to 100.

Mr Renzi contends that the system of government set out in Italy's 1948 con-

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stitution is a dog's breakfast that generates recurrent instability. At present, parliament's two chambers have identical powers. No bill becomes law until they agree on a common text. According to the premier, this results in pointless delays that hobble well-intentioned governments, such as his own, that want

to pass modernising reforms. Yet the record of postwar governments, including Mr Renzi's, disproves his argument.

Italian parliaments pass more laws year by year than those in France, Germany, the UK and the US. Despite lacking a Senate majority, Mr Renzi's Democratic party has passed tax cuts and a labour market reform that are centrepieces of his programme.

Neither are the Senate's powers the reason there have been more than 60 governments in the past 70 years. The chief explanation is the fragmented nature of Italy's political parties. This reflects the fragmentation of Italian society. Every party, and each faction of every party, stands for a distinctive set of economic, geographical, ideological, religious or social interests – or even for the self-interest of its leader, as when Mr Berlusconi's Forza Italia ruled Italy.

Pace Mr Renzi what Italy needs is not more laws more rapidly passed, but fewer and better laws. They must be written with care, and enforced, rather than blocked or circumvented by Italy's public administration, special interests and the public. The reforms are bound up with an electoral law that will award bonus lower house seats to the winning party, handing it a majority for a five-year term. Cooked up in 2014 by Mr Renzi and Mr Berlusconi, this is a thoroughly bad reform, too.

In EU capitals, there is a feeling that Mr Renzi deserves support. A rudderless Italy, vulnerable to a banking crisis and to the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, would spell trouble. Yet a referendum defeat for Mr Renzi need not destabilise Italy. A victory, on the other hand, might expose the folly of putting the tactical objective of Mr Renzi's survival ahead of the strategic need for a healthy democracy in Italy.

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