

THE PEOPLE WON'T VOTE FOR AUSTERITY


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Thomas Walkom, [The Toronto Star](#), 28 February 2013

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Instead they flocked to anyone — no matter how ludicrous — who they believed understood their pain. How else to explain the miraculous political resurrection of discredited and lecherous Silvio Berlusconi? The former prime minister captured enough votes to put his coalition in solid second place.

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How else to explain the striking success of a brand new party led by Beppe Grillo — a professional comedian who now holds the balance of power in Italy's crucial upper house?

Politicians around the world would be wise to take note. This was not just a case of Italians being goofy. This was a case of voters saying they've had enough of kowtowing to the bond markets, the deficit cutters and those who would reform pensions out of existence.

More to the point, they've had enough of so-called moderates and their know-it-all experts. The reaction to austerity and to the great recession of the 21st century is taking many forms.

In Greece, it has expressed itself through the rise of neo-Nazis and a militant left.

In France and Denmark, it is invigorating anti-immigrant parties. In Britain, it has breathed new life into the anti-European United Kingdom Independence Party which, until recently, had been dismissed as a tiny gaggle of Colonel Blimps nostalgic for the days of the Raj.

In the U.S., economic hard times encouraged the growth of the far-right, anti-modernist Tea Party. President Barack Obama's re-election may have obscured this movement. But it has not eliminated it.

So far, Canada has been largely spared the politics of demagoguery. High commodity prices have kept this country's economy moving, if not exactly humming, along.

But high commodity prices invariably fall. And when that happens, Canadian politicians will face choices their European counterparts are already grappling with.

Will Canadian leaders be "sensible" like British Prime Minister David Cameron and slash public spending in order to keep bond-rating agencies happy?

Ontario's Liberal government has already embarked tentatively along this path. Tim Hudak's Conservatives promise to go further.

And what about the New Democrats? Both federally and provincially, they are desperate to portray themselves as sound economic managers. When it is Canada's turn to reap the whirlwind will they, like their European social democratic counterparts, do the "reasonable" thing, demonstrate their political "maturity" and support "necessary" fiscal restraint?

That was the strategy of Greece's now-discredited Socialists. It was also the strategy that Italy's centre-left Democratic Party followed — with disastrous results.

The Democrats should have won this week's election handily. Instead, they squeaked by with a small majority in the lower house, while failing to capture the equally important upper chamber.

The lesson of Italy is that the old solutions don't work. Those old solutions, sometimes referred to as neo-liberalism, emphasize fiscal frugality (cuts to social welfare), flexible labour markets (low wages) and structural adjustment (throwing people out of work).

They may sound fine in scholarly treatises. They may appeal to the sleek and well-fed. But in real life, people won't accept them.

Instead, as Italy demonstrates, they will vote for anyone who promises another way. If the only ones promising another way are racists, sybarites and clowns, that's who people will vote for.

