



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# The end of centrism



Is it a coup for political centrism when the granddaughter of Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini leaves the ruling Brothers of Italy party that has its roots in a post-WWII movement founded by supporters of her progenitor?

Tellingly, Rachele Mussolini, a city councillor in Rome, did aim to frame her jumping ship to the slightly more centre-right Forza Italia in such terms, recently **saying** that she was opting for a party that was, "closer to my moderate and centrist sensibilities."

This neatly encapsulates the problem currently facing centrism across the democratic world, and possibly beyond: It now stands for anything that is not far-out-there extreme or in terms of the US elections, weird. And no, the fact that so many people vote for such nasty ideas shouldn't normalise them.

This has been a bumper year for elections around the world, with the most important one, in the US, still to come.

But already we can conclude that if political systems are to resist the mounting successes of extremist and populist parties, it is not enough merely to appeal to an amorphous and contradictory centre that is mainly defined in opposition to extremes.

## Common sense rules of political discourse

Common sense rules of political discourse, such as not inciting violence or hatred and remaining within the law, should not be called centrism, nor be restricted to only parts of the political spectre.

But most importantly, steering clear of an extremist agenda should not be equated with being devoid of a political vision, whether that be left-wing, right-wing, or indeed, centrist.

If the extremes are to be successfully challenged, it is increasingly evident that non-extremist parties will have to reclaim the

whole political spectre as their legitimate arena and should avoid being lumped together into an easily targeted elite-associated ruling class that stands accused of being a bulwark of the status quo.

**'Disruptors' and others promising radical change, often neither legal, humane, nor realistic, i.e. achievable, hold sway in an increasing number of West-European countries**

Merely being non-extremist no longer cuts it with electorates the world over. On the contrary, 'disruptors' and others promising radical change, often neither legal, humane, nor realistic, i.e. achievable, hold sway in an increasing number of West-European countries.

Italy and the Netherlands are now dominated by far-right parties. In Germany, all eyes are on the shocking **gains** of the far-right AfD in state elections, while there's also concern over the rise of the left-wing populist BSW.

In France, the far-right RN of Marine Le Pen is set to be in effect the **power** behind the throne of the new centre-right Prime Minister Michel Barnier, while the radical left is incandescent with rage over having been ignored.

## Extremist politics are on the march

Extremist politics are on the march everywhere, not just in these countries, and it's a truism by now to say that even where the centre is holding, it's either moving to the right or in danger of crumbling altogether.

In fact, this 'centre' has been completely redefined by the ever-greater acceptance in societies of extremist politics. Other terms, such as 'mainstream', suffer from a similar inflation of values.

## If far-right and radical-left movements gain mass followings, they almost become mainstream by default

If far-right and radical-left movements (there's no complete equivalence between the two) gain mass followings, they almost become mainstream by default.

In Italy and the Netherlands, as earlier in Austria, far-right parties that were once beyond the pale and that keep voicing deeply disturbing extremist ideas despite trying to present themselves as having moderated their stances, have become so legitimised that old, non-extremist parties now support their inclusion in government and even their rule.

In both countries long-ruling right-of-centre political parties, Forza Italia in Italy and the 'Liberal' conservative VVD in the Netherlands, attempted to counter the far-right by adopting parts of its rhetoric and even its programme, especially on migration.

In the Netherlands, last year's elections were widely interpreted as right-wing voters opting for 'the real deal' when it comes to anti-immigrant invective. In this case, Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom, PVV. As with Italy's Forza Italia, the question can be asked of how 'centrist' the VVD still was and is?

Like Forza Italia, the VVD is now happily propping up a government dominated by the far-right.

## Lessons for non-extremist politics

France and Germany offer different lessons for non-extremist politics. The deep unpopularity of Olaf Scholz's 'traffic light' coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and the right-of-centre liberal FDP has much to do with its constant infighting and the perception that it cannot decide on any one political direction, whether

it's over the budget or military aid to Ukraine.

Scholz is now tacking hard to the right by adopting stringent anti-migration measures that are popular among both AfD and BSW voters. Still, very few observers rate his chances high of turning his political fortunes around before next year's elections, if the coalition even holds together until then.



*There is no common political vision, beyond opposing the far-right, that now allows for the establishment of a stable French government - Marine Le Pen*

As Chatham House **wrote** about voters in the run-up to the European elections earlier this year: "Even those who are most concerned about migration are unlikely to believe mainstream parties that adopt far right policies."

The problem for Scholz's coalition is not purely migration politics, or really any other specific policy, it is the perception that it is without direction and increasingly only there in opposition to more extreme choices.

Germany's political arithmetic is such that the centre-right CDU/CSU could be facing the same problem should it win the elections, which it now seems on course for.

It would almost certainly have to choose between a 'centrist' coalition with either Social Democrats or Greens, or, as yet unthinkable, rely on the support of the far-right AfD.

In France, the successful attempt earlier this year to keep out the far-right RN of Marine Le Pen ranged from the radical left to parts of the centre-right. But having achieved its objective,

the problem with this kind of 'centrist' blocking tactic has at once become clear: it is not centrist at all.

There is no common political vision, beyond opposing the far-right, that now allows for the establishment of a stable French government.

In all the above cases, merely being non-extremist has failed to stem the march of the far-right and the radical left (confusingly, some radical left parties, such as Germany's BSW, are far-right in their migration politics). Even adopting parts of the extremist agendas has not saved hitherto mainstream parties.

The one meaningful attempt to create a truly centrist movement, by Emmanuel Macron in France, looks like it is headed for the exit in tandem with his presidency.

Even if centrism is not declining on its own, maybe it should be abandoned anyway, at least in the sense of it only being defined as a last-ditch effort to keep out the extremes. What is needed now is a politics of vision, not one of merely circling the wagons.