Right up there in the Premier League

The Northern League's right-wing populists have long been part of the Italian establishment

The Northern League's (*Lega Nord*'s) right-wing populists have been part of Italy's parliament for 30 years. In Silvio Berlusconi right-wing coalition government, several of their representatives held ministerial positions.

The League is hoping to form part of a similar winning alliance in next year's elections. This tactic has helped it find legitimacy, lending it the appearance of a normal parliamentary party within a right-wing bloc. But the left has also played a role in making the right-wing populists socially acceptable.

The Northern League originated in the early 1980s as a collection of regional parties which united in 1989. The charismatic Umberto Bossi headed the party until his resignation in 2012. Its current leader is Matteo Salvini.

Since 1992, the League has had representatives in both houses of parliament – the Chamber and the Senate. It governed as part of centre-right coalitions under Silvio Berlusconi in 1994, 2001 to 2006 and 2008 to 2011. At present, it controls two of Italy's most economically important regions: Lombardy and Veneto.

Northern Italy for North Italians

Originally the party championed a kind of regional populism, holding up the central government, 'robber Rome' and the country's 'parasitic South' as its main targets. Its political stance – essentially 'Northern Italy for North Italians' – derived from the belief that Italy's booming North was hamstringed by its obligations to fund Rome's corrupt politicians and the backward, poorer South.

Soon the imaginary nation of 'Padania' – Italy's Po Valley – became the focal point of the League's policies. The party made regional autonomy,

and eventual secession from Italy, its explicit objective. Immigration was a secondary issue.

In its early days, the league refrained from attacking the EU. Indeed, during discussions over Italy's entry to the euro in the 1990s the party stated that while the North was in good shape to join, it would have to shed the dead weight of the South to survive in the currency zone.

During early 2000s, the party took a sharp turn to the right. Its attention turned to immigrants and the 'Islamic threat'. When Bossi was toppled by an embezzlement scandal in 2012, the party's regionalist and secessionist elements faded further into the background. His successor Salvini has adopted a stance similar to Marine Le Pen's Front National, blaming immigrants, the EU and the euro for the region's ills. The League has also expanded into Italy's southern regions, where it campaigns under the motto *'Noi con Salvini'* ('We are with Salvini').

In the period 1994 to 2013 the League won between four and ten per cent of the votes in the national elections, although they only stood in the North. With its forays into other regions, however, surveys show it polling around 13 per cent, making it one of the two main forces on the right, alongside Berlusconi's Forza Italia.

Bossi's resignation has done nothing to dent the party's approval ratings. The former leader was convicted of embezzling huge amounts of party funding for private expenses. In September, a court ordered the seizure of party assets to the tune of 50 million euros.

Drama in Parliament

In parliament, the Northern League rallies against the political 'establishment' – sometimes in dramatic fashion, such as the time an MP entered the Chamber with a hangman's noose in protest at 'corruption' from other parties.

Their MPs hold up crass banners designed to attract maximum TV coverage, and heckle their fellow parliamentarians. In June this year, the League's MPs occupied the government benches in the Senate in a bid to disrupt a debate on laws governing foreign nationals, causing a scuffle in which one minister suffered a minor hand injury.

The League also makes a habit filing of thousands of amendments in order to delay discussions on proposed legislation. During a series of debates on constitutional reform, the party submitted a record 82 million

of them.

However, the League's parliamentary work is not limited to high-profile disruptions. It had eight years of governing in coalition, during which time its representatives headed key departments, including the Interior and Justice ministries. In its time in power, the League implemented some of its flagship policies, including harsher drugs laws and bills restricting the rights of foreign nationals.

The party has been in opposition since 2011, but has not rested on its laurels. Studies by Openpolis, an association that campaigns for transparency, show the League's deputies and senators consistently come out top when it comes to submitting draft legislation or putting parliamentary questions to the government.

At no stage has the Italian left conducted a broad, systematic debate about the Northern League. The party achieved political breakthrough in 1992, becoming a permanent fixture in Italian politics when it entered government in 1994 – the same year Silvio Berlusconi came to power with Forza Italia. Berlusconi came to represent the entire centre-right in Italian politics. The Northern League's role as junior partner received far less attention.

Massimo D'Alema, then leader of the Democratic Party of the Left, was one of the only social democrats to challenge the League when in 1995 he described it as 'a rib of the Italian left' – meaning the right-wing populists were already making inroads into the left's traditional heartlands, particularly among factory workers.

Despite his criticisms, D'Alema was also prepared to work with the League. In the early nineties he entered talks with its leader Umberto Bossi, which led to the League pulling out of the coalition and thus bringing down Berlusconi's government. The League subsequently propped up a technocrat cabinet led by Lamberto Dini from early 1995 until new elections in 1996. This government also received parliamentary support from the Democratic Party of the Left. The League and the social democrats were effectively coalition partners.



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