

Italy (Italia)

Italy was one of the six founding members of the European Community in 1957. With a population of fifty-eight million people, Italy is one of the largest countries in the EU. It is situated on the Italian peninsula in southern Europe. It has land borders with France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia. The national language is Italian. Italy has often had a turbulent political culture, yet has succeeded in becoming one of the world's largest economies.

Recent History

The Italian Republic was established in 1946, after the collapse of Benito Mussolini's Fascist government during World War II. Throughout the Cold War, Italian politics was dominated by the Christian Democratic Party on the right and the Socialist and Communist Parties on the left. There were frequent changes of government and Prime Minister, although the parties involved changed little.

This situation was transformed in the early 1990s following a major political corruption scandal which involved many leading politicians and led to the collapse of the main political parties of the postwar period – the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. Under a new electoral system, referred to as the Second Republic, new parties emerged and the Italian political landscape was transformed. The most significant change was the emergence of a new centre-right *coalition* led by Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia Party. This held power from 1994-96 and again from 2001-2006. The other new political force was a coalition of centre-left parties. This governed from 1996-2001 under Prime Ministers Romano Prodi, Massimo D'Alema and Giuliano Amato. Following elections in April 2006, Mr Prodi formed a new government after his coalition won a very slim majority.

Government Structure

Italy is a parliamentary republic. Executive power rests with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. They present proposals to the Parliament and issue decrees. The Head of State is the President, currently Giorgio Napolitano, who has a mainly ceremonial role, seen as representing political unity. The President is elected by an electoral college for terms of seven years. The Italian Parliament has two chambers – the House of Deputies, which has six hundred and thirty members, and the Senate, with three hundred and fifteen members. They are elected through a system of proportional representation, although six senators are given life appointments. Italian voters also elect seventy-eight MEPs.

Local government in Italy is divided between twenty regions, sub-divided into one hundred provinces. There are five regions which have greater autonomy to reflect their special cultural identity – Aosta, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino-South Tyrol, Sardinia and Sicily.

Italy and the EU

Italy has a significant position within the EU. The 1957 founding treaty was signed in Rome and Italians have traditionally been strongly supportive of European integration. It has been argued by some people that Italian support for the EU reflects dissatisfaction with the instability of domestic Italian politics. Italy has been at the forefront of all major steps towards EU integration, including the single market, the Schengen convention and the Euro.

However, Italy has occasionally drawn mistrust from its fellow member states. In the build up to the launch of the Euro, there were serious concerns in some quarters that Italy would not be able to meet the convergence criteria set out in the Maastricht Treaty (1992) because of high government debt. Some argued that Italy, along with its Mediterranean neighbours Spain and Portugal, should be left out of the Eurozone because their economies were not strong enough.

More recently, a debate has begun within Italy itself over whether the country should stay in the Eurozone because of economic problems including slow growth and a lack of competitiveness. For other countries that use the Euro, this is a cause for serious concern because it could result in the collapse of the entire project. At the moment, however, the Italian government remains committed to Euro membership.

Italy also caused dismay amongst some members in 2003, when it decided to support the US-led invasion of Iraq, which was opposed by France and Germany. This placed strain upon relations between member states.

Facts and Figures

- Italy is the world's sixth largest exporter of manufactured goods, with production mainly based in wealthy northern Italy.
- Southern Italy is far less developed, with unemployment as high as twenty percent in some areas.
- With 1.29 children for every woman between sixteen and forty-nine years of age, Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe.
- Italy has experienced slow GDP growth for several years. In 2005, GDP grew by only 0.2 percent.
- Italy is one of the few EU member states prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

Technical Terms

Coalition: a formal agreement between political parties to share power in government.

Links

- <http://www.governo.it/>
- <http://english.camera.it/>