



MORE DEMOCRACY IN TRENTINO

By Alex Marini

Più Democrazia in Trentino is a recently formed committee with the purpose of promoting democracy in the Autonomous Province of Trento¹ in northern Italy. The committee officially constituted in January 2012 at the House for the Peace in Rovereto² after preparatory meetings and discussions where a different range of people manifested their will to impulse a change in the local political scenario. The way to put this into action is through a legislative proposal supported by a citizens' initiative.

The goals of the legislative proposal are wide, however the members set two priorities. The first is the removal of the quorum in referendums at the provincial level. The second is to introduce the confirmative referendum for the legislative and administrative acts issued by the local government. Together with the two priorities, as settled in the statute, the committee is open to promote other initiatives related with direct and participative democracy at all levels: local, national and even communitarian if necessary.

The territory of Trentino is characterized by more than 90% of mountains in which a subsistence economy determined high rates of emigration³ from the 19th century to the years after World War II. Since then, thanks to the typical peasant laboriousness, forward-looking administrators and a strong

social capital, a forceful economic development has brought the province to be one of the richest and with the highest quality of life in Italy.

In the third century the social and economic situation has mutated and contradictions and paradoxes are coming up at every turn. The social capital which guaranteed the growth in the second part of the last century is eroding by an excess of affluence unevenly distributed, a static political class and a greater possession but fewer values. Trentino, instead of becoming a vibrant civil society where good governance and bottom-up policies are implemented, is evolving towards a conservative and traditionalist society with a dangerous lack in democracy.

The systematic and intense financial intervention by public authorities in the economic sphere and civil society is subordinating the citizenry under the government of the province. This phenomena is weakening the social cohesion which has branded local communities for a long time. Clientelism is leading to a distorted distribution of power. Social confidence is decaying. From a model based on cooperative democracy the province is shifting towards a corporative plutocracy model shaped by the type of relation existing between patrons and clients.

Local political parties, which are disconnected from the national realm, and the establishment of the Cooperative Federation⁴ which controls, among others, the sector of grocery distribution and the banking system, have shifted away from their historical function on promoting social equity, accountable government and community development. They are in the tenacious effort of

¹ Provincia Autonoma di Trento: <http://www.provincia.tn.it/>

² <http://piudemocraziaintrentino.org/comitato/>

³ For more information: <http://www.trentininelmondo.it/>

⁴ Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione: <http://www.ftcoop.it/Portal/>



keeping personal power and satisfying a limited sum of private interests. It is a small group that seeks to monopolize the lives and thinking of others.

The governor of the province is still showing ambition of running for an extra mandate, the so called Dellai-quater⁵. Similarly, the president of the cooperatives' establishment has been pushed to run for another mandate, the so called Schelfi-quater⁶. In this "cupola of power", employment opportunities are provided on "spintarella", the classic Italian underhanded recommendation for hire. Thus, the contracts for the construction of public infrastructure or for public supplies are subscribed within the "magnadora"⁷, the local corruption system. In this context, it is difficult even for the Provincial Parliament⁸ to overhaul administrative procedures that are often assigned by the Provincial Executive Board⁹ to subsidiaries or in-house companies.¹⁰ These subsidiaries are impossible to control because they are regulated by private and commercial law.

⁵ Trentino's term to refer to the fourth mandate for the president of the province despite the limit of two mandates allowed by the present law.

⁶ Trentino's term to refer to the fourth mandate for the president of the Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione, after having changed the rules which indicated three mandates as a maximum.

⁷ Information on magnadora at: <http://www.questotrentino.it/qt/?aid=10171> or <http://www.piergiorgiocattani.it/Documents/partito%20territoriale.pdf>

⁸ Consiglio Provinciale is the legislative body of the local government: <http://www.consiglio.provincia.tn.it/>

⁹ Giunta Provinciale is the executive body of the local government: <http://www.giunta.provincia.tn.it/>

¹⁰ In the last years the Giunta, the executive body of the local government, has driven to proliferate the in-house companies determining an expensive administrative poliformism. The abuse of this model has established an intricate system of subsidiaries with a high degree of discretion in hiring and

Furthermore, in this hierarchical formation there is little space for the 217 local municipalities¹¹. In fact they are too small and fragmented to resist the central power. For resources and capacities they depend entirely from the authority of the province like a modern feudalism, which doesn't allow self-determination. The councils can not express their autonomy following the principle of variable geometry on the base of their needs and interests. In 2006, a costly new intermediate bureaucratic level of administration – Comunità di Valle¹² - has been imposed from the regional government.

The erosion of democracy in the local scenario and, even worse, an erosion of the social trust and reciprocity in the communities have a fundamental human significance and stimulate serious thought. In this sense, Più Democrazia in Trentino initiative wants to commit into action the possibilities for escaping from this stall, giving voice to common people for a better future.

managing human resources and in organizing public tenders. <http://www.sgp.provincia.tn.it/Welcome.aspx>

¹¹ List of the 217 municipalities of Trentino: <http://www.comuni-italiani.it/022/lista.html>.

In the province of Trento the number of municipalities is almost double than in the province of Bolzano :

<http://www.tuttitalia.it/trentino-alto-adige/77-province/numero-comuni/>.

With the exception of the cities of Trento, Rovereto and Pergine and a few other towns, the local municipalities have an insignificant dimension in order to be autonomous in the administration of their tasks.

¹² In 2011 an abrogative referendum has been promoted by the populist party of the opposition – Lega Nord – but the influx of voters is boycotted by the parties in power in order not to reach the participation quorum of 50%. In addition to the campaign for abstention, the governor fixed the date of the referendum to the 29th of April, falling on the weekend preceding a national public holiday, when citizens usually go on holiday.



The main motivation which is shared by the committee members is to create the conditions for a qualitative step forward in the relation between citizens and government. Direct democracy is one of the solutions to respond to the demand for political participation, pluralism, rule of law and social justice. Movement towards full democracy is not an easy path, thus the committee is looking at foundations, trade unions and civil society organizations for raising support.

The committee proposal extends the focus from the two priorities to other innovative and ambitious tools to address the needs of the people and the realities on the ground: on-line portal for direct democracy, public debates, citizens' juries, legislative assistance to popular initiatives, equity in the information, development of programs for democratic civic education and so on. The plan is to inspire reforms to help developing freedoms, accountability, participation and checking government excesses.

Digitalization and on-line publication of petitions, popular initiatives and referenda aim to a stronger partnership with the people. The direct democracy portal want to emphasize on sharing and exchanging proposals, criticisms and ideas which originate from civil society and from people-to-people interaction. Viable political rights are to help sustainable and inclusive social and economic development. By giving public voice to organized people, the political representatives will have to listen not only the requests from a limited number of lobbyists but also the demands expressed by civil society.

Public debates and citizen juries together with information tools and technology will allow rapid exchange of information on the best public policies to implement. Social dialogue is considered the base to enhance a more detailed and transparent political

discussion, where all positions can effectively emerge. Clearly an oriented and open dialogue will increase awareness, transparency and accountability in public administration with a gradual reduction of corruption and illicit financial flows.

The inspiration that lies under the project for more democracy is to find a path to empower people to choose their own future. Renovation must be through participation of people and frequent rotation of the political class. This can be possible by integrating and counterbalancing representative democracy with direct democracy.

In conclusion, Più Democrazia in Trentino through a popular initiative is aiming to contribute to the democratisation of the local political life introducing innovative instruments which have demonstrated to be successful in other countries. On one hand, the objective is to create public opinion through the promotion of popular rights. On the other hand, the objective is to involve people in political decisions to explore talents and motivations towards a more prosperous, fair and ecologically sustainable society.

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