

## Chapter 6

### Political and Bureaucratic Organisation

#### Local Government

The constitution of Italy of 1947 provides for three forms of local government; regional, provincial and communal. Italy is divided into nineteen regions, ninety-two provinces and about 8,000 communes. Regional government until 1970 was only of limited importance and had been established in only five areas. In most of Italy, therefore, there were only two levels of local government: the province and the commune, of which the latter was by far the more important.

The commune is administered by a council known as the *consiglio comunale*, which is elected every five years<sup>1</sup> and has between fifteen and eighty members (twenty in the case of Pertosa) according to the size of population. The minimum number of meetings for the council is two a year, at which the communal budget must be discussed. Its sphere of action is fairly extensive. By law, it is obliged to maintain a register of births, marriages and deaths, prepare each year a list of electors and keep records of changes of residence and property. In addition, it is expected to provide a wide range of community services; local roads and their illumination, the land, buildings and maintenance of elementary schools, the provision of water and sanitation, a local police force and poor relief are the most important of its many responsibilities.

The activity of the commune, however, is severely limited by the precarious financial situation in which it operates. Its income and spending are closely controlled by law, which draws a sharp distinction between obligatory and facultative expenditure. Nevertheless, after meeting the costs of obligatory services, particularly the salaries of employees, few communes have the necessary funds to embark on ambitious programmes of voluntary services, and most are heavily in debt.

Much of the responsibility for the perpetual condition of indebtedness in which almost all the communes of Italy work lies with the legislative framework of local finance, which is still based on Fascist laws going back to 1931 and 1934. In addition to what it may derive from its own possessions, usually only a fraction of its total revenues, the commune has four main sources of income: a local property tax, a levy on industry, tourism and

commerce, family income tax and purchase tax. Only the last two of these are under its direct control. Before the war, these taxes were probably sufficient to meet most of the commune's needs. Nowadays, however, as a result of post-war inflation and the extra range of services they are expected to provide, few local authorities are able to balance their budgets.

Another factor which tends to aggravate the financial difficulties of the commune is the practice of tax-farming. In Pertosa, as in many other small communities throughout Italy, the privilege of collecting local taxes is granted to private companies known as *esattorie*, which pay a fixed sum at the beginning of the year to the commune. The costs of this method of collection are naturally high. Thus, Kogan cites the example of Palermo, in which, in 1958, about 60% of the revenue due from the *imposta di consumo* (consumption tax) went into collection costs. Commenting on the system, he writes,

'firms must compete to get the contract, and their bids include the costs of paying off the politicians, functionaries and political parties which are involved.'<sup>2</sup>

One might also add that only too often in small towns and villages tax-farming concessions are granted as part of the political spoils system, as rewards to the supporters and followers of the party in office.

The control and supervision which the prefect exercises over local authorities is a further limitation on their field of action. Since the war the prefectorial system has been frequently attacked, particularly by the parties of the left, and some of its critics have suggested that it should be abolished altogether. Thus, in a famous article, '*Via col prefetto*' (Away with the prefect), first published in 1944, Luigi Einaudi wrote 'Democracy and the prefect are profoundly repugnant to one another', and went on to argue that one could not expect self-reliant and responsible local leaders to emerge, if their every action was controlled and regulated by the prefect.<sup>3</sup> Many of Einaudi's criticisms were directed at the extra powers which had been granted to prefects under Fascism, when elective local government was abolished. Nevertheless, in post-war Italy the role of the prefect has remained virtually unchanged, and he retains his traditional position at the hub of local government, the state's agent in the province, supervising its activities and those of the communes within its jurisdiction.

The powers of the prefect include not only control of the legality of the acts of provincial and communal administrations (*controllo di legittimità*), but also control over their opportuneness (*controllo di merito*), which is a power left over from the Fascist era. In effect, this means that he has the discretion to reject any administrative decisions which, although not precluded by law, is unacceptable to the government on other grounds, and has ample excuses for constantly intervening in local affairs. Moreover, the prefect is

entitled to suspend communal councils if they fail to respect the law. In such cases he appoints a commissioner to fulfil the functions of the suspended administration. In theory, commissioners remain in charge for a period of between three months and a year, after which new elections should be held: in practice, however, they often hold office for much longer periods. Further control on local authorities is exercised by the *giunta amministrativa provinciale* over which the prefect presides. This body has a number of elected advisors, but most of its members are nominated by the prefect. Its main purpose is to scrutinise the administration of communal finances, and local authorities are unable to authorize even petty items of expenditure without first seeking its approval.

The control and supervision of the prefect not only constitute one of the main limitations on the activities of local councils, but there is also good reason to believe that his powers are not always exercised merely in the cause of sound administration. Spokesmen of left-wing parties invariably accuse him of discriminating against them in the communes which they administer. Thus, in Pertosa a socialist assessor told me that the reason for the delay in obtaining approval for plans to add a new wing to the local school was that the provincial and national authorities intended to prevaricate until such time as a Christian Democratic council succeeded the left-wing coalition then in office. He claimed that the motive behind this stratagem was to convince villagers that only the DC party was capable of procuring state patronage. Similarly, in the summer of 1965, the local Communist party protested that the prefect and the Ministry of the Interior had deliberately postponed the elections until emigrants who had returned for the fiesta (and who were expected to vote for the left) had gone back to Germany.

Although it is, of course, impossible to assess the validity of these accusations, the terms of service and the way in which prefects are appointed lend strength to the contention that they are expected to fill both political and administrative roles. Whilst most of them are drawn from the administrative branch (*corpo direttivo*) of the civil service, they can, in fact, come from any background. They are nominated by the President of the Republic on the advice of the cabinet, and can be transferred or removed at will by the government. Conversely, they can be promoted for good service to more important provinces or to the Ministry of the Interior. In short, their career prospects depend on pleasing their political superiors. Certainly, the control which the prefect exercises over local administrations is vast, and it is more readily used when their political affiliations are different from those of the central government.

Communal councils have three constituent elements: the *consiglio*, which consists of all the elected councillors, the *giunta*, and the mayor or *sindaco*. Both the mayor and members of the *giunta* are elected to office by the entire body of councillors and are normally the leaders of the political

party or alliance of parties which was successful in the preceding election. The mayor is both the representative of the state in the commune and the head of the council and the *giunta*. In his capacity as state official, he is responsible for the publication of government decrees and laws and, in part, for the maintenance of law and order. As head of the administration, he must supervise the organisation of the communal offices and has disciplinary control over municipal employees. In legal disputes the mayor represents the commune, and his signature must be appended to all documents issued by it.

The *giunta* is the executive branch of the communal administration. Headed by the mayor, its other members are the *assessori* who are responsible for and head the committee which control the various communal departments: housing, education, public works, and so forth. The *giunta* has the duty of putting into effect the decisions of the council, preparing the budget, appointing and supervising communal employees, studying matters to be decided by the council and taking decisions in matters which, though normally within the competence of the whole council, are judged to require urgent action.

In addition to its elected representatives, the commune has a number of permanent employees. Since much political dispute turns on the allocation of these jobs, it is necessary from the outset to describe the various sorts of local office holders and the ways in which they are appointed. There are three main categories of communal employees: the *parastatali* (quasi-state employees), the *impiegati* and the *salarati*.

Although the *parastatali* are nominally under the jurisdiction of the communal authorities, they are also members of the state bureaucracy. A good example of an official of this type is the *segretario comunale*. In effect, the secretary must serve two masters. As the person in charge of the municipal offices he is supervised by the mayor, who is responsible for making an annual work assessment which counts towards promotion in his career. For his original appointment and eventually promotion, however, he depends on the prefect and the Ministry of the Interior. Similarly, although he is paid by the commune, his salary and terms of service are similar to those of state bureaucrats. The dual allegiance of the secretary is also manifest in his day-to-day duties. He is present at all meetings of the *giunta* and the council, and his expert knowledge is at the disposal of the mayor and councillors. On the other hand, he must advise on the legality of the council's decisions, and try to ensure that they are drafted in a form which is acceptable to the prefect. The secretary, therefore, is never merely a servant of the commune, but also an intermediary between the village and provincial authorities.

The main distinction between the other two categories of communal employees, the *impiegati* and the *salarati*, is that the former are clerical and the latter manual workers. In small villages such as Pertosa, the number of municipal workers is fairly small, but they are probably more than the

commune really needs, and they are certainly more than it can afford to pay. In 1964 there were twenty permanent communal employees (five *impiegati* and fifteen *salarati*) in Pertosa, and their salaries accounted for a large portion of the annual budget.

Overstaffing, particularly in the lower ranks, is a common feature of all Italian bureaucracies, but it is especially prevalent at the local level, where, for reasons I discussed in Chapter 5, employment in the public service, with its regular hours and pay, is of high esteem. Thus, in Pertosa *portar na copola*, to wear a beret with its insignia of office, is a privilege and honour to which most villagers aspire. Consequently, there is a fierce competition for jobs of this kind, and the right to appoint people to them is a highly cherished prerogative. Nowadays, the appointment of the *parastatali* is no longer in the gift of the commune, but it has retained the right to choose its own *impiegati* and *salarati*. The former are appointed by the entire council, the latter are simply nominated by the *giunta*. In both cases, however, there are legal procedures which must be followed. Thus, for example the commune is obliged to hold public examinations before appointing *salarati*. Similarly, it must give precedence to certain categories of people: war widows, orphans and the disabled.

After a probationary period of two years, communal employees are protected from summary dismissal. They can be sacked only for gross dereliction of duties, and only after a special tribunal has confirmed the charges against them. Otherwise they have security of tenure, unless the jobs that they are doing are declared redundant, and the prefect agrees to a reduction in the establishment.

### The Electoral System

In Italy, communal and provincial elections are called administrative elections to distinguish them from general elections which are known as *elezioni politiche*. In so far as this distinction implies that at the village level only issues of local importance are at stake, it is misleading. Indeed, the central government and the national political parties take considerable interest in the outcome of local elections. Normally, provincial and communal elections are held on the same day, and it has been the custom of parliament to go into recess to let senators and deputies go into the country to lend support to local political campaigns. The scale of these campaigns is such that an outsider might be led to suppose that he was witnessing a full general election.

In Pertosa communal elections are out of line with those in other communes because two post-war administrations were dissolved before their terms of office were completed. Nevertheless, during the election of 1965 deputies and senators of all the main political parties thought it worthwhile abandoning their parliamentary duties to take part in the campaign. The

reasons for their interest were essentially twofold. First, local elections are held to be a good indicator of the strength of the parties in the country as a whole. Secondly, a successful and thriving party in control of local administration and patronage is a useful base for building and maintaining a majority which will serve for parliamentary elections.

As part of their general interest in success in local elections, the Christian Democratic party and their allies have modified electoral law on the eve of almost every administrative election since the war. Basically, there are two electoral systems in operation. In communes with more than 5,000 inhabitants a form of proportional representation is employed; in small communes a simple majority system with a special premium given to the winning list is used. Most of the changes in electoral law have been concerned with the dividing line between large and small communes. Since, however, Pertosa has always had a population of less than 5,000 in post-war years, its electoral system has remained substantially unchanged.

In small communes candidates for election are grouped in lists. Each list must contain at least one-fifth and not more than four-fifths of the total number of seats to be filled. Provided that they are sponsored by an adequate number of citizens, there is no limit to the number of lists which can be presented. Although *liste civiche* (i.e. lists which are not affiliated to a political party) are not uncommon, lists are usually put forward by political parties or groups of parties in alliance. Thus, in the 1965 elections in Pertosa two lists were presented: the first, was composed entirely of Christian Democratic candidates, the second, under the symbol of the *aratro* (plough), combined the Socialist and Communist parties. Both presented sixteen candidates, the maximum allowed, since the council at Pertosa has twenty members.

Voting is by secret ballot, and each elector has the right to vote for a maximum of four-fifths of the total number of candidates to be elected. The ballot papers are so arranged that he can vote for a simple party symbol, thereby giving his vote to all who appear under it. Alternatively, he may distribute his votes amongst candidates on different lists. The majority list takes four-fifths of the seats on the council; the remainder are given to candidates with most votes of preference on the next most successful list.

Since the war, all citizens over the age of twenty-one have had the right to vote, except for lunatics, bankrupts and certain types of criminals. Electoral candidates, however, are subject to more stringent restrictions. In the first place, they must demonstrate that they are able to read and write. Secondly, communal employees, priests with the cure of souls and persons with outstanding debts or civil actions pending with the commune are ineligible for election. Furthermore, two or more persons related to each other as ascendants or descendants or as first degree affines are not allowed to hold office at the same time. Indeed, Italian communal law shows a marked

degree of scepticism about the ability of councillors to distinguish between their private and public roles.

In comparison with the system of proportional representation, election by simple majority has two main structural implications. First, although it does not allow for the expression of fine shades of party political differences, the four-fifths premium given to the winning list makes, in theory at least, for stable administration. Secondly, by allowing individual choice in the distribution of votes, there is a tacit recognition that in small communes personal ties with candidates are stronger than the ideological bonds of party.

### Party Offices and Organisations

All the main political parties are represented in Pertosa by a party secretary and a local office. Nevertheless, the numerical strength of the Christian Democrats and the Communists at the national level is faithfully reflected in the village. Although four of the smaller parties: the Liberals (PLI), the Nenni Socialists (PSI), the Social Democrats (PSD), and the Independent Socialists (PSIUP) have local secretaries, their offices function intermittently and usually only for short periods before elections.

Of the two main political parties, the Christian Democrats have the more extensive organisation and the greater number of paid-up members. In part, this is because they can command the services of many of the village upper classes, in part, because many peasants and artisans, who were once members of the parties of the left, have now emigrated. Both the Communists and the Christian Democrats have large offices in the middle of the village which serve as recreational centres for members, and both maintain part-time secretaries.

In addition to the party branch offices, there are also a number of unions and workers associations which, although not constitutionally linked to the parties, are closely identified with them. The largest of them is the *Confederazione dei Coltivatori Diretti*, a smallholders' association. At the parliamentary level the *Coltivatori Diretti* are an important pressure group within the DC party, and their leader, Paolo Bonomi, controlled about 60 out of 273 deputies in the 1958-1963 administration. Nationally, the confederation stands for agricultural protection: locally, it organises the sale of agricultural machinery and fertilisers and offers its members technical advice. In Pertosa the confederation has about 400 members, and is led by a prosperous peasant who is closely allied to one of the village's most important landowners.

Although the Communist party runs a rival smallholders association, the *Alleanza dei Coltivatori Diretti*, it is of little importance in Pertosa, where its main organisation is the *Confederazione Generale Italiana di Lavoro* (CGIL), or the *Camera del Lavoro* as it is often called. CGIL was originally a trade union for all Italian workers. After a long series of disputes, however,

the Christian Democrats broke away to form their own union in 1949. Technically, its leadership is divided between the Communists and the Socialists, but both nationally and locally it is largely monopolised by the former.

Lastly, there are a number of Catholic associations which, although not strictly speaking political in their aims, are closely connected to the Christian Democrats. Thus, in Pertosa there are two sections of the Society for Catholic Action and a branch of ACLI, an affiliated Catholic workers association. Officially, Catholic Action is a lay association for the dissemination of the faith and ACLI a workers educational organisation. Neither have explicit political aims, although the former has a sub-committee, the *Comitato Civico*, which is entrusted with electoral propaganda. Both locally and nationally, however, there is a great deal of overlap between the leadership of the Christian Democratic party and the Catholic associations, and the latter constitute an important pressure group in parliament. Indeed, many southern deputies began their political careers as secretaries of local branches of Catholic Action or ACLI.

No account of the political influence of Catholic organisations in southern Italy is complete without some consideration of the political role of the Church and priests. It is frequently, if perhaps unkindly, said that in the parish priest and the local church the DC party has an additional electoral agent and party office in every village throughout the South. Particularly since 1946, when women were given the vote for the first time, the influence of the priest on voting behaviour has been very great. Indeed, I was told by a Communist leader in Pertosa that his party would have been overwhelmed both nationally and locally if two structural principles of Italian society had not come into conflict: the devotion of women to the Church and the confessional, he argued, had been checked by the fact that they were normally expected to vote according to the wishes of their fathers or husbands.

During the 1948 elections, when partisan feeling was at its height, priests took an active part in politics. Thus, in Pertosa, where the parish priest was the brother of the DC mayor and a large landowner in his own right, parishioners were forbidden to vote for the parties of the left in a series of pulpit homilies, the last of which took place on polling-day. Similarly, an order of nuns which ran a local kindergarten and helped to organise the women's section of Catholic Action acted as a DC propaganda agency. Thus, I was told that in this period mock elections were held amongst the children, and those voting for parties other than the Christian Democrats were punished. Even in 1964 I heard small children repeating rhymes to the effect that true Christians vote for the DC party and Communists are assigned to hell. The source, my young informants told me, was the nuns whose classes they attend. Nowadays, preaching political sermons on election day is forbidden, but many priests still believe that they have a duty to



foster and support the Christian Democrats in every possible way.

One of the most important functions of party organisations and associations is the preparation of *pratiche*. A *pratica* is the documentary preparation needed when treating with the Italian bureaucracy, the formidable battery of certificates which the government requires before granting pensions, passports, sick benefits and so forth. Either directly or through their provincial offices, local parties and associations help members to prepare their certificates and try to ensure that the *pratiche* are completed as quickly as possible.

Through the branch secretaries, party members are linked to provincial and national political organisations. Especially in the case of the Christian Democratic party these linkages are of great importance. Ever since the war, it has dominated Italian national politics, and has been fairly successful in controlling recruitment to the state bureaucracy. Its leaders have access to government officials and agencies at all levels, and often have the power to influence their decisions. Thus, whilst all the political parties act as intermediaries between their members and the state bureaucracy, the Christian Democrats enjoy special privileges and are singularly well placed to obtain favours and rewards for their supporters.

#### **Bureaucratic Organisation**

Since I deal with bureaucracy in greater detail in Chapter 7, in this section I discuss some general characteristics of Italian bureaucracy, and describe the main government field offices which are to be found in Pertosa. Following Weber's ideal type, modern legal-rational bureaucracies can be said to have four main characteristics: they are specialised in the sense that regular activities are distributed amongst officials as fixed duties, they are organised hierarchically, they are regulated by a body of abstract rules and officials are expected to act in a spirit of impartiality.<sup>4</sup> In this section I concentrate on the first two of these criteria.

One of the most striking features of Italian bureaucracy is its extreme centralisation. Few decisions are made locally and relatively trivial matters must go to the capital for confirmation. Even in Rome decisions are rarely made by junior staff, but are passed on for the consideration of director-generals (the heads of the various ministerial departments). In important cases even a director-general's directives must be reviewed by the minister or the party executive office. The reasons for this intense concentration of decision making are somewhat complex.

In Italy, as in most developing countries, state resources are allocated according to political as well as economic and administrative criteria. Voting strength, particularly in the impoverished South, is built up by the judicious use of state patronage. Patronage can be distributed either to individuals or

entire communities, and in both cases the minister responsible is anxious to stress their indebtedness to him. Thus, for example, after considerable popular agitation, the government agreed to allot funds to re-build the drainage system in Pertosa. Its decision was announced in a telegram signed by Colombo, the Minister of the Treasury, which went as follows:

'Thanks to my personal intervention, I am happy to inform you that forty million lira have been assigned for drainage in Pertosa.'

Similar telegrams are sent to people who are given jobs in state sponsored industries or in the bureaucracy. Indeed, ministers maintain large private secretariats, whose main duty is to write vast numbers of letters to constituents in highly personal and familiar terms which purport to come from the minister himself.

This system of patronage and the personalisation of relationships has a number of important implications. First, decisions which in Britain would be routine administrative matters, have a high political content in Italy. Secondly, since patronage is given with the object of building up electoral support, it is dispensed according to political rather than bureaucratic criteria. Thirdly, since much of the patronage available to the government consists of relatively small favours: grants to build schools, new drainage systems, jobs for individuals and so forth, the minister himself will want to be consulted about the way in which it is allocated, for he is probably a far better judge of the political issues at stake than the relevant bureaucratic department. In the Italian political system power is based on the control of patronage resources, and ministers and influential politicians are reluctant to entrust their administration to others. Thus, minor administrative matters come to assume considerable political importance, and can be decided only by politicians in Rome.

One of the main consequences of centralisation is that the bureaucratic process is exasperatingly slow. Thus, for example, I know a peasant in Pertosa who had waited for more than twenty years for a war pension to which he appeared to be entitled, and to wait two or three years for the completion of a *pratica* is very common. The way in which the bureaucracy is recruited is also partly responsible for these delays. The policy of appointing large numbers of the socially unfortunate has led to overstaffing of junior posts, whilst there is a real shortage of senior officials. Since the latter are both overworked and unable to delegate their decision making powers, their offices are overwhelmed by a backlog of unfinished *pratiche*, and applicants must wait for months and even years before their cases come up for consideration. Consequently it is very tempting for the powerful and influential to try to bypass the bureaucracy altogether, and to use their political connections to arrive directly at the source of power.

- 4 Weber (1921: 196-8).
- 5 Benelli (1965: 53).
- 6 Not all teachers are appointed in this way. *Insegnanti di ruolo* (teachers who have passed a special public examination) have fixed posts. In 1964 however, they constituted only a small percentage of the total body of teachers in the province of Matera.