

Monti declares readiness to return

'Credible' support sought for reform agenda

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

Mario Monti, Italy's technocrat prime minister, has ended weeks of speculation over his future by declaring his readiness to shed his neutrality and run for office next year if he sees "credible" support for his reform programme.

Presenting his "Monti agenda" for Italy and Europe at a press conference yesterday, the former EU commissioner spoke of the "moral imperative" driving his decision. But he later admitted that his tentative move into politics carried "many risks" and a "high probability of not succeeding".

Widely respected abroad for pulling Italy from the brink of financial meltdown when he replaced Silvio Berlusconi's discredited government 13 months ago, Mr Monti - who has never run for elected office - is more often cursed at home for driving up taxes and unemployment.

Opinion polls suggest a hypothetical alliance of centrist groups led by Mr Monti would take less than half as many votes as the centre-left Democrats, and would struggle to compete with the populist, euro-sceptic message of Mr Berlusconi and the protest votes attracted to the anti-establishment Five Star Movement.

Rather than launch his own political group, Mr Monti instead invited all parties to consider his liberal, pro-Europe manifesto which would soon be published on the internet.

Pressed to clarify whether he would run in the elections, Mr Monti made clear that as a senator for life he could not be listed as a candidate, but that he might be willing to be nomi-

nated as prime minister.

"If a credible political force asked me to be candidate as prime minister for them, I would consider it," he said.

In caustic comments, Mr Monti indicated he saw no such credibility in Mr Berlusconi, who has flip-flopped from attacks on Mr Monti's "German-centric" economic record to inviting to him to run as a leader of a broad alliance of moderates. Angelino Alfano, secretary of the centre-right People of Liberty, later retaliated by saying there could be no collaboration with Mr Monti.

Mr Monti also had harsh words for the main leftwing trade union group - a mainstay of support for the Democrats - for blocking his labour reforms.

Pier Luigi Bersani, leader of the Democrats and frontrunner to become Italy's next prime minister, said he would study Mr Monti's proposals while noting that Italy needed "more change, more equity and more jobs".

Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, the head of Ferrari who has turned his Italia Futura think-tank into a broad yet Catholic biased civic movement, endorsed Mr Monti, calling him a "great political leader and international statesman".

With February 24 the most likely election date, there is time for a new centrist movement to coalesce around Mr Monti.

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Monti gambit sets stage for volatile Italian poll campaign

Electoral strategy

Former PM needs to develop centrist alliances in his bid to reshape political landscape, writes
Guy Dinmore

After serving as unelected prime minister for 13 months, Mario Monti has taken what he admits is the highly risky step of preparing to enter politics.

His move sets the scene for what promises to be Italy's most volatile election campaign since the war, as the appointed technocrat seeks a popular mandate to continue his reform agenda.

Italians filling the streets of Rome in a last pre-Christmas shopping frenzy paused to follow live broadcasts of Mr Monti's press conference two days after his resignation.

The hour-long speech was rambling in his usual professorial way, but questions brought clarity and Italy



eventually got the message – the caretaker prime minister who staved off a crisis on financial markets, but is resented for the taxes he imposed, is considering putting himself to the electoral test in February.

Opinion polls suggest Mr Monti has next to no chance of defeating the centre-left Democrats. But he could succeed in reshaping Italian politics by challenging Silvio Berlusconi's leadership of the centre-right, a threat that will be resisted with all the resources at the disposal of the billionaire media mogul.

For the moment that ambition remains hypothetical. Mr Monti has declared his readiness to be the candidate for prime minister of a centrist alliance, but having no party of his own he needs others to provide a convincing vehicle.

"He is in midstream. He is not yet Caesar," said Roberto D'Alimonte, politics professor at Luiss University in Rome, who has advised Mr Monti on his electoral prospects. "He has left one bank of the Rubicon, but he has not yet arrived at the other side."

The vehicle Mr Monti needs is taking shape in the form of a civic movement launched by Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, entrepreneur and head of Ferrari, and the Catholic centrist UDC party led by Pier Ferdinando Casini.

What amounts to a trial balloon floated by Mr Monti in presenting his agenda is also intended to draw support from fringes of the main centre-left and centre-right parties.

Franco Frattini, former foreign minister under Mr Berlusconi, has signed up. Supporters of Matteo Renzi, the reformist mayor of Florence will also be tempted.

"Monti is doing things his way," said Mr D'Alimonte. "But will he succeed? It remains to be seen. Monti made clear he is appealing to forces in civil society to enlarge the centre, but those forces are quite weak."

Under Italy's electoral system, the Democrats as the largest party would be guaranteed a majority in the lower house of parliament. But a centrist alliance led by Mr Monti could deny the centre-left a majority in the senate, putting him in a strong position to

negotiate a coalition with Pier Luigi Bersani, the Democratic party leader.

Mr Monti has clearly closed the door on an alliance with Mr Berlusconi. But the price of supporting

'He has left one bank of the Rubicon, but he has not yet arrived at the other side'

the Democrats in power would be a commitment from Mr Bersani that the former communist could find hard to give – a marginalisation of the main leftwing trade union federation as well as his leftist ally, Nichi Vendola.

Despite this uncertainty, markets last week signalled their expectations that Mr Monti would continue to play a stabilising role. Yields on Italy's €2tn of sovereign debt fell sharply from the highs reached after Mr Monti made the surprise announcement on December 8 of his intention to resign early.

Hitting back with his own television appearance yesterday, Mr Berlusconi said he had woken up "screaming" after having a nightmare of a "second Monti government" backed by magistrates-turned-politicians. Mr Berlusconi's own nightmare of the courts could also return to haunt him. A Milan court trying him on charges of abuse of office and paying for a juvenile prostitute hopes to reach a verdict in February, just ahead of the vote. Mr Berlusconi denies the charges.