

Monti sets stage for battle with Berlusconi

Italy's centrist politicians offer support

By Guy Dinmore in Rome

Italy's centrist politicians are rallying behind Mario Monti's offer to lead an alliance into elections in February, setting the stage for a confrontation with Silvio Berlusconi in his attempt to return to power.

Mr Monti, who was appointed technocrat prime minister 13 months ago and has never fought an election in his life, was due to meet prospective coalition partners today to discuss strategy and candidate lists, politicians said.

His decision to seek a second stint as prime minister, while not yet official, could lead to an even more fragmented parliament than had been expected. It injects a fourth element into a battle between the centre-left Democrats, Mr Berlusconi's centre-right People of Liberty and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement.

On Christmas night Mr Monti sent messages on the Twitter social network that were seen by supporters and critics as confirming his intention to run for office following his resignation last Friday.

"Together we have saved Italy from disaster. Now politics is to be renewed. No use complaining. Work for it. Let's rise into politics," he wrote. The 69-year-old former economics professor is assured a seat in parliament as a life senator and will serve as caretaker prime minister until the next government is formed after elections on February 24-25.

Mr Monti's 25-page manifesto - entitled "Change Italy. Reform Europe" but better known as Agenda Monti - has been posted on the internet, drawing

endorsements from a civic movement led by businessman Luca Cordero di Montezemolo and small centrist parties, including ~~Pier Ferdinando Casini's Catholic UDC.~~

A few breakaway politicians from the mainstream parties have also backed Mr Monti, who is expected to be joined by several cabinet colleagues including Corrado Passera, his minister for economic development.

Setting out a liberal, strongly pro-Europe agenda, Mr Monti declared his adherence to the "social market economy" philosophy of the European People's party, a centre-right federation whose caucus he attended in Brussels this month.

Mr Berlusconi's centre-right People of Liberty (PDL) sees Mr Monti's intervention as a challenge to the billionaire media mogul's domination of Italy's centre-right for two decades.

Mr Berlusconi, seeking a fourth term as prime minister, is furious Mr Monti spurned an invitation to lead an alliance of "moderates" including the PDL. Mr Berlusconi was scheduled to go on television last night. According to previews of the broadcast, he was set to criticise Agenda Monti as a continuation of "policies driven by Germany" and the "wrong remedy".

Pier Luigi Bersani, leader of the Democrats, was much more measured, saying there was "nothing surprising [in Mr Monti's platform]".

