

Amenduni reminds us that on the political battlefield one doesn't live (or win) only thanks to communication. But that's not all: he goes one step further and accurately defines the framework of a spin doctor's job. He reminds us that the first commandment in the handbook of a political communicator is not to *sell the candidate*, but to *avoid making mistakes*. We think Amenduni is dead right. How do you explain the incredible come backs, the resounding missed victories of recent years, all the times the opinion polls proved wrong when the votes were finally counted? Do you accuse the polling agencies? Hang your head dejectedly, disappointed by democracy? Ok, you think this only happens in Italy... well then, listen to this story. In spring 2005, the red-green coalition which had ruled Germany for 7 years ran aground: it had just been resoundingly defeated in Nordrhein-Westfalen where the conservatives had never been in power since the '60s. The Social Democratic Chancellor Schröder still had one arrow to his bow: his personal charisma. Like a good poker player, he resigned in May: September early elections were called. In June,

opinion polls assigned the CDU/CSU almost 50%, the SPD less than 30%: a coalition between Christian Democrats and Liberals could rule Germany for four years, unless ... On August 22, Prof. Paul Kirchhof gave an interview to the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* as Minister of Finance *in pectore*: Kirchhof thought it was a brilliant idea to announce the fiscal programme of the next conservative Government. He got a little carried away: a flat tax of 25% for everyone! The programme was a gift for the rich, and in any case it was hard to prove the contrary; announcing it 3 weeks before the vote was a present on a silver platter for their adversaries. It was just too easy for Schröder to exploit such a blatant mistake. On September 18 the CDU/CSU was duly confirmed as the winning party. Only with 35% though: no majority, no coalition with the liberals. This was how the up-and-coming leader of a big political party allowed an eminent tax law expert to let the public mix up his own ideas with the party's programme: this strategic error is a better explanation for the poor results, than the possible mistakes made by the polling agencies. Do you want an Italian

example? Amenduni mentions the extraordinary case of another illustrious Professor. And not because he wasn't endorsed by the media: on the contrary, he was described as representing the surefire duo "stability-respectability"; a knight in shining armour who was to save the country from the abyss. With a naïveté which would have put the poor Kirchhof to shame, he told the CNN that his mission was to "*destroy domestic demand*" rather than rescue public finances. However, a question duly arrived on April 24 2012: how would you convince a graduate working in a call centre, earning 5 euro an hour, to stay in Italy? 19 seconds of silence on live TV. In those 19 seconds the glaring shortcomings in the idea of restructuring the Italian political system around a core team of technocrats was revealed all its glory. Indeed, you don't win by *selling a candidate*: but in the free market of *ideas*, the ruthless laws of competition admit no exceptions.

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AMENDUNI

## ÉMINENCE GRISE AT 30. SPIN DOCTOR OR GUY OF THE SOUTH?

“*The Italians do indeed tend to trust a demiurge leader. Just think for a moment about Mario Monti's rise and fall: from almost unknown to Prime Minister in three short months, and a 70% to 20% drop in his approval rating eleven months later.*”

**Telos:** Let's focus on two incredible election/media victories: Berlusconi in 2001 and Renzi in 2013/2014. Different contexts, very different media tools, but the key message seems much the same: *let's change Italy*. Does this mean that despite the Italians' distrust of institutions and parties they still place their faith in a leader who promises demiurgic interventions?

**Dino Amenduni:** Change is a political issue exploited by many, not just Berlusconi or Renzi. Everyone wants to change Italy, but not many explain how or who should benefit and who should not. But that's another story. I think there's another reason for Berlusconi's success in 2001 and Renzi's in December 2013 and May 2014, a reason that has nothing to do with them as individuals: there were no credible opponents. Berlusconi lost twice, ten years apart, to the same opponent: Romano Prodi (1996 and 2006). When Berlusconi's up against a credible adversary, he does not win. Renzi won the primaries and led the PD party to a resounding victory in the European elections because people were more doubtful about his adversaries. We often overestimate the individual skills and abilities of politicians, but I believe that a candidate's adversary is the first and most important variable we should consider when assessing an election campaign. For example: if two mayoral candidates are both engineers, how useful is it to write "*I am an engineer*" on a poster? Obviously it isn't. The word "*engineer*" is perhaps positive in absolute terms, but can be totally irrelevant in some kinds of competitions. It's true that Italians do indeed tend to trust in a *demiurge* leader (rather than Berlusconi or Renzi, we should focus more on Mario Monti's rise and fall: from almost unknown to Prime Minister in just three months, and a 70% to 20% drop in his approval rating eleven months later), but this has more (not less) to do with the Italians' distrust in Italian institutions and political parties. Since I can't trust the State, the Regions, the Municipalities and public authorities in general (the Caste!), I trust single individuals or politicians who, however, can do nothing by themselves (i.e., without the machinery of Government). As long as we Italians continue to distrust our institutions, the country runs the risk of jumping from one man of providence to another, and then toppling him from power year after year.

In our opinion, "*It can be done*" is totally different to "*Italy changes direction*": in a few short years we've gone from Veltroni's rhetoric of reconciliation of differences, (his famous "*but also*"), to Renzi's message touting his controversial position that everything we've done so far was wrong. Does this prove that divisive political communication pays, while ecumenical paternalism does not? Or are things more complex than this?



**Dino Amenduni.** Class of 1984, is the new media Director and political communication consultant of the communication agency [Proforma](#) with headquarters in Bari, where he was born, lives and works. He graduated in Psychology of Communication with a thesis on the voting behaviour of new voters and obtained a Master's degree in web-marketing. Since January 2013 he works at the [local newspapers of the Gruppo Espresso](#), writing articles analysing national politics (and political communication), and since February 2014 he also collaborates with [Repubblica - Bari](#). He teaches political communication (more and more) and social media marketing (less and less) all over Italy. He collaborates with other online newspapers, in particular [Valigia Blu](#). Dino has taken part in the election campaigns of: Emiliano (Bari - 2009), Vendola (Puglia Region - 2010) Serracchiani (Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region - 2013), Renzi (2013 National PD Primaries), PD National (2014 European elections), Kyenge (2014 European elections) and Decaro (Bari - 2014). He is a member of staff at the [Perugia International Journalism Festival](#). In spring 2013 he was invited to take part in the [IVLP training programme](#) of the US State Department, and travelled to Washington, Minneapolis, Denver and San Diego to follow an intensive course on social entrepreneurship. "*Luckily however we don't live on politics alone*" and so he has become an inquisitive observer of the evolution of pop culture in Italy, the elective country of anomalies. In his free time (☺) he runs his own blog ([Teste Pensanti](#)) where he (chiefly) posts citations, and his musical blog called [Trecentosassantacinquegiri](#). Two of the jobs he likes best is being the deputy captain and first-string report card supervisor for his suburban five-a-side football team, [Real Katenaccio](#).

*M. Sonsini*

Clarity pays when it comes to communication. But I wouldn't embellish it with too much philosophy if I were you; most of our political thinking is unconscious and has sedimented after being stimulated for years by politics, the media and our families. The slogan "*It can be done*" is less clear than the one it alluded to (Obama's "*Yes we can*"), and also less clear than "*Change direction*" which among other things conjures up an easy-to-understand visual dimension. We should not confuse clarity with the oversimplification of the message, nor should we confuse oversimplification with simplicity, which is a positive trait (and very complicated to achieve because it's really hard to be clear, simple and imaginative). However clarity has to be pursued at all costs: if a message is not understood by the people to whom it is directed, it's useless. However, having said that, I wouldn't attach too much importance to slogans: Veltroni stepped in after the absurd end of the Prodi government. He'd probably have lost no matter what kind of slogan he used, or maybe he'd have won if he'd used "*It can be done*" and had been a candidate after a full-term left-wing legislature (supposing that a full-term left-wing legislature is at all possible in Italy).

**You've organised more than one successful campaign. What is the real added value of a spin doctor? How important is it to *sell* a person or *spread* a message? Can you give us an example based on your own experience?**

If a communicator wants to *sell* a person, perhaps by applying marketing theories to politics, or if he has the ambition to do so, he's already doomed to failure, even more so in politics. Voters recognise and quite rightly punish anything that smells artificial. I think that all a political communicator has to do is to work in two directions. On the one hand, he has to enhance the candidate's strong points and tone down his weak points; he shouldn't make anything up, and tell it as it is. On the other, he should be more focused on avoiding mistakes rather than having brilliant ideas. Just think of the campaign for the PD primaries on 8 December 2013 with Renzi as a candidate. I'd be crazy to say that Renzi won thanks to *Proforma*; he would have won anyway, even without us. However I can safely say that we didn't do any serious damage, and that's already a good result, given the communication errors we repeatedly see all the time.

**There's a question that pops up spontaneously after every election campaign: why is the relationship between the Italians and polling agencies so difficult?**

The relationship between the Italians and polling agencies is excellent. For example, the estimates about the results of the European elections in Italy proved wrong, but the agencies "get the figures right" in the municipal elections in big cities, sometimes even down to the percentage point. An unwanted third party hovers between citizens and opinion polls: politics, and politics makes 1 in 5 Italians choose who to vote for only in the last week running up to the election, while 7% decide when they step into the voting booth (Statistics: Demos). With such a volatile vote, no model or agency will ever be accurate. Also don't forget that opinion polls can't be published in the last 14 days before the vote: so we don't know if these agencies had figures which were more reliable but could not be published, nor do we know if the fact that these data were not published (and the simultaneous emergence of more or less accurate unofficial surveys) influenced the electorate one way or another. In the United States, polls are published while voting is still ongoing. I think we should do the same here in Italy, unless we prefer to think that Italians are stupid: when they're in the polling booths Italians prove just the opposite by taking very complex and rational decisions. Just think of the PD party in the last round of elections in several Italian cities: over 50% in the European Elections, less than 40% in the municipal elections. Both votes were held on the same day!