

Europe's leaders

The 'seismic' EU Parliamentary elections in late May have changed the face of the Union's leadership. Juncker, Merkel and Italy's Renzi are guiding the project, Cameron is trying to stem the tide

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Europe was called to the poll stations last spring to elect its new European Parliament in spring and the outcome has provided the new European leadership with a broad popular consensus.

Jean-Claude Juncker 'swept the board' for the European People's Party and is now the President of the European Commission. Angela Merkel, the most popular and powerful German political figure of this century, was very much the 'kingmaker' in Juncker's ascension, helping to block the objections of Britain's Cameron.

One of the most remarkable successes in the May vote was the spectacular confirmation won by Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, whose pro-European electors gave him a massive 41 percent. Italy, and Mr. Renzi, assumed the Presidency of the European Council on the first of July this year for a six month term.

At the end of the year the member states align their budgetary and economic policies with the objectives and rules agreed at the EU level.

As luck would have it, the guidance of the process at this moment in time falls on a political figure, Matteo Renzi, whose own national electoral success brings special credibility to his efforts, allowing him a greater freedom of movement than is often the case with the rotating presidency.

Renzi is an anomalous figure in Italian politics. Not yet forty years old, he is astonishingly young by national standards. Italy, which tends to prefer its statesmen with



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white hair and many wrinkles, has been called by some a 'gerontocracy' – the government of the aged.

Mr. Renzi's rapid rise to power may be a sign that mould is breaking, especially since his background is outside of national politics. He made his name as Mayor of Florence and is – or at least has been – a Boy Scout and adopted a motto dear to Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the scouting movement, as his

own: "Leave this world a little better than you found it."

Cheery and pragmatic expressions of optimism are not at all in the classic Italian political style, which tends to prefer Latin citations – often slightly fractured – and high philosophy rather than practical reminders of what is instead simply 'do-able'.

Renzi's pragmatism is evident as well in his approach to Italy's economic problems, in many ways similar to those of Europe at large. He appears to understand that the battle to put the economy back on track will be won not so much through elaborate policy manoeuvres – the money is just not there – but rather through structural reform: fixing what is broken rather than erecting entirely new, and costly, edifices. His Italian electors have already shown that they understand, and approve, this concreteness.

With a firm base in Italy, he has now begun appearing on the broader European stage, where he seems to have found a home among the moderates who can speak with understanding to

both national and pan-national interests.

Mr. Renzi's occasional brutal negotiating style is also outside of the Italian political tradition, which usually favours velvety allusion to clear speaking.

His sharp insistence on the candidacy of the Italian Foreign Minister, Federica Mogherini, to take the slot now covered at the European level by Lady Catherine Ashton as the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Pol-

icy has raised eyebrows both in Europe and in Italy for the presumed 'youth' of the candidate.

Ms. Mogherini, at 41 years of age, is in fact slightly older than Renzi – at least one of the reasons he may feel that she would be perfectly capable of covering the Ashton role, generally considered not be a terribly difficult 'act to follow'.

Renzi's penchant for clear speaking may also be an advantage in dealing with the increasingly eurosceptic Cameron Government in Britain, whose future role regarding the European Union is an issue that must be faced squarely at some point – and whose relationship with the more conventional EU leadership, as exemplified by Jean-Claude Juncker, sometimes appears to have reached a point of no return.

Mr. Renzi's occasionally rough and ready – but effective – English will also be helpful. Italy's leaders have not always been marked by their ability to speak other languages than their own.

Stronger actors on the European stage, ones with genuine and wide popular support like Juncker, Renzi and Merkel, (provided the latter comes round to the idea of being a European leader), may increase the involvement of EU citizens in the ongoing unification project and help get the process moving again in the face of the economic and geopolitical shocks of recent years.

We at East have chosen to depict these leaders – old and new – as super heroes on this issue's cover. This is our way of both expressing our support for the mission they have undertaken and to remind them that Europe, and all of it citizens, are expecting appropriately 'heroic' – and effective – efforts from them. The time for procrastination is over! **E**

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☒ The Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, after his surprising electoral success in May, is now to be put to the test as President of the European Council.