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“He changed Ticino without ever having governed it”

Giuliano Bignasca was a key figure in the politics of Ticino for 22 years as the founder of the free newspaper “Mattino della Domenica”, co-founder and life president of the protest movement “Lega dei Ticinesi” and a National Councillor. He completely unsettled the established parties – the CVP and FDP, which had divided up power, influence and office between themselves for decades.

By Veronica Alippi



The Lega dei Ticinesi's poster to mark its 20th anniversary and Giuliano Bignasca (pictured right) with Marco Borradori, Lugano's new mayor, taken in December 2012

A photograph taken in partial shade. An artful incidence of light highlights the upper part of the face – a for once solemn expression and, of course, a pair of glasses perched on the white hair. This was the image on the poster that adorned the streets of the canton of Ticino at the beginning of 2011 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Lega dei Ticinesi. The figure featured on the poster was Giuliano Bignasca, property entrepreneur and party founder. Bignasca – “the dwarf”, as he was known throughout Ticino – was not just the unmistakable figurehead of the Lega but also its founder, leader, life president and the heart and soul of the party. The Lega was Bignasca, and Bignasca was the Lega.

Questions were raised as to what would become of this movement upon news of his death from a heart attack in the early hours of 7 March this year. It had trounced the opposition on 10 April 2011, becoming the strongest party in Ticino's government with two out of five seats. The answer emerged several weeks after Bignasca's death. The Lega became the most powerful party in Lugano, the canton's major city, and secured the office of city president for Marco Borradori.

The “Lega dei Ticinesi” was officially founded on 17 January 1991. Its establish-

ment was preceded by the launch of the free newspaper “Mattino della Domenica” in March 1990. Bignasca set up the “Mattino” with clear political intentions. He had been cut out of a business deal for the purchase of some SBB property and had resolved to fight against political patronage in Ticino and the power of the traditional parties. The “Mattino” was an immediate hit having a major impact on Ticino's media and publishing scene.

Forecasts and reality

History repeated itself with the Lega – an overnight success and a huge impact. During its first election campaign in spring 1991, the party won 12 of 90 seats in Ticino's parliament and only just missed out on entering the government. At the federal elections in October, it took two out of eight Ticino seats in the National Council and one seat in the Council of States. Politics in Ticino was rocked to its foundations. Many observers and politicians predicted that such a shock outcome would not be repeated. It was deemed “a protest vote, a temporary phenomenon that would last for one legislative term and then disappear without trace”. However, events did not turn out that way. The Lega has gone through

highs and lows but has established itself as a permanent part of Ticino's political landscape and has shaped, modelled and fundamentally changed the canton over the past 20 years. It has always remained true to itself, if not always in terms of policy at least in what it stands for.

The Lega has actually never had an ideological foundation. Giuliano Bignasca, who always set the party's political agenda, primarily pursued his own objectives. In particular, he gunned for the establishment, the political parties, the federal capital of Berne and Europe. This approach did not change over the years. The unusual blend of liberalism and social mindedness that influenced Bignasca's thinking did not change either. This focused on lower taxation and less bureaucracy on the one hand and more support for citizens in need and taking on the health insurance schemes on the other.

A keen instinct for people's concerns

Bignasca's political opponents constantly accused him of duplicity and pointed to contradictions in his policies, especially to do with taxation and finance. However, such paradoxes clearly appealed to voters, especially those who wanted to express

their dissatisfaction with traditional politics and still do. It also won support among voters who sought change because they believed it was necessary to overcome economic, social and personal challenges.

Bignasca's policies were often discredited as being populist and politically naïve. However, as a "political animal" he had a keen instinct for common concerns and the needs



of the inhabitants of Ticino, whom he called "la gente" (the people). He often came up with simple, even trivial, ideas but they proved effective. The "Mattino", which was practically the official party mouthpiece, publicised its slogans and maxims, highlighted who its enemies were, and mocked and insulted its victims. It often used pejorative language and photo montages that provoked outrage. Bignasca was accused in many quarters of making politics more savage. He was denounced on countless occasions for slander and libel. He was subjected to several court judgements, which he tended to ignore. The remarks made by the Lega's representatives are usually crude, often disrespectful and frequently xenophobic. This may have contributed to the movement's success. It is certainly true that Bignasca had a good instinct for identifying which issues concerned the people of Ticino and what they felt threatened by, such as the phenomenal rise in the number of cross-border workers.

An inseparable pair

Genuinely democratic structures have never existed within the Lega. Bignasca made decisions and announced them in the "Mattino" without involving his members

of government or parliamentarians. This also led to rows that were soon followed by impassioned reconciliations. The life president had an ambivalent relationship with his main supporters. His most important ally was Marco Borradori, a member of the cantonal council for 18 years and today mayor of the city of Lugano. Bignasca and Borradori complemented one another wonderfully.

One stood for bawdy politics, personal attacks and ultimatums, and the other for dialogue, compromise and respectful conduct. One was quick-tempered and uncouth, the other always composed and polite. There were also issues on which they could never agree, most notably concerning the environment and the canton's finances. However, they never

aired their differences in the media. They were an inseparable political pair right up until Giuliano Bignasca's death.

Bignasca's political views were contradictory and at times incoherent. So, too, was his private life. He was shy and suddenly found himself thrust into the spotlight. He was a self-confessed cocaine user but was certainly not proud of his vice. The reaction to the news of his death on 7 March 2013 showed that he was highly respected not just by his friends but also by his enemies, if not on a political level at least on a personal one. "The dwarf" had also been extremely generous, unable to turn away anyone who asked for his help. His willingness to help people surprised those who essentially saw him as a braggart and a provocative figure. His appearances in judge's robes at one of his trials or with a cane and wooden shoes in the National Council will live long in the memory.

He played a rather macabre role in the election of Lugano's city government on 14 April this year. He passed away after the official electoral lists had been submitted, and the Lega decided to leave his name on the list in light of the wave of emotion that had taken hold of the city. Bignasca was therefore re-elected. From

beyond the grave he helped the Lega to become the strongest party in the city government and contributed to the election of Borradori as city president.

Who will take over Bignasca's role?

What does the future hold for the Lega now? Does victory in Lugano represent the ultimate breakthrough or a final uprising before its demise? How will politics in Ticino change without Giuliano Bignasca? The party suddenly left leaderless went through a challenging few weeks. Despite calls for unity, there has been no shortage of controversy and internal conflict. The "Mattino", the great propaganda machine, has already moderated its language. The question is whether the party can continue Bignasca's recipe for success and maintain the balance between right and left. Much of the Lega's social understanding may also have disappeared with Bignasca. It is uncertain who will now take over the reins within the party. For the moment, it has decided upon collective leadership. However, Borradori is clearly the only person everyone trusts to replace the powerful figure of Bignasca.

The other parties have changed their attitude significantly during the 22-year period in which Giuliano Bignasca turned Ticino's political landscape upside down. They initially ignored Bignasca, then realised that they had underestimated him and began to fear him. They occasionally attempted to imitate him by adopting an even more aggressive tone than him. When they recognised the Lega's ability to anticipate major political issues, they began to cooperate and ally themselves with it. However, they have still not come to terms with the shock result at the election in April 2011. The traditional parties are adopting a cautious, hesitant approach and are puzzling over whether the Lega's success will be maintained. One of Bignasca's obituaries read: "He changed Ticino without ever having governed it." It remains to be seen whether this will continue after his death.