

What's wrong with technocrats?

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A lot has been made of the recent appointment of Lucas Papademos and Mario Monti as Prime Ministers *in pectore* of their respective countries.

In particular, the public debate has focused on their status as unelected officials who allegedly constitute a break of the democratic continuum.

It can actually be argued however that, even though they are technocrats, their democratic credentials are even stronger than those of the politicians they have been called to replace, given that they are expected to lead governments of national unity. Indeed, in these countries today, only grand coalitions can provide the necessary legitimacy to push through the tough reforms that are on the agenda.

Both countries are in a very grave situation, requiring extremely determined action and hard measures, but both suffer from a highly fragmented and confrontational political system, where infighting between and within the main parties can and has led to paralysis.

Given the level of political fighting, no representative of either of the political fronts (centre-left and centre-right) would be acceptable to the other. Papandreou could not have led a national unity government because Nέα Dimokratia would not have supported him, and Berlusconi could certainly not have led a national unity government because the Partito Democratico would never have supported him. Hence, the need for technocrats to come to the rescue.

As for the citizens, who on this occasion are denied the right to don their voters' hat, one should not be too quick in assuming that they will take the appointments negatively. To begin with, in both countries the constant squabbling and inability to take decisive action has led to a disillusionment (if not outright disdain) with politicians, who are perceived as grossly overpaid, perks-seeking members of a privileged caste.

The answer to the question about the popular support for the governments that are being formed will thus depend on relative importance one attaches to the dichotomy input-legitimacy/output legitimacy. That is, are citizens more interested in having a say about their government (and the actions that it should take) through elections, or are they more interested in having a government that actually delivers results (and improves the situation of the country? Empirical evidence seems to point in the direction of a positive reaction to the appointments: the first snap-polls indicate that 50% of the Italians favour Monti, and 58% would support his government. In the eyes of many Greeks and Italians, the two soft-spoken professors are untainted by political affiliation and are perceived as competent

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individuals who will be guided in their action by their respective country's interest, rather than that of their party.

Moreover, the deterioration of the two countries' economic situation has been so rapid (for Italy, a matter of two weeks), that most voters probably realise that, even though an election would have been desirable, it would have taken so long to organise that the countries would have defaulted twice over in the meantime. It takes months to organise an election, while in the current circumstances it only takes weeks (or a few days) for a country to go under.

Finally, a few eyebrows are raised because the nominations of Messrs Papademos and Monti seem to "let the markets decide instead of the people" and because of their (excessive) closeness to EU leaders.

With regard to the first argument, it is useful to bear in mind that the citizens and their elected representatives would have had more options to choose from had they started from a better socio-economic position. Greece and Italy must now accede to the indications of their creditors because they have too large a debt in the first place. Had they respected (or adhered more closely to) the Maastricht criteria (that they voluntarily ratified), their position would not have been so close to the edge today. It was the Greeks and the Italians who rubberstamped, through their behaviour at the polls, the policies and practices that led them to the brink.

The fact that Monti and Papademos are close to EU circles is of course not a surprise or a coincidence; it is rather a sad reflection of the populist drift in these countries that one should even think of holding this against them. This is true for two reasons: First the officials who have a high-level European career are normally the best of their crop: they typically are the ones that transcend the national borders to get involved in policy-making at the continental level. So it is only natural that their respective countries should resort to their talent, making the best use of the human capital represented by these highly qualified civil servants in a time of duress.

European technocrats are an appropriate choice for these jobs, secondly, because this is a European crisis that affects the eurozone in its entirety, and part of it has to do with trust. In the European economy as a whole, there is actually enough money around to survive the crisis, but the northern investors no longer believe that they can trust the potential borrowers from the south. Changing this state of affairs also requires appointing interlocutors who are credible in the eyes of their European partners, a credibility that to an extent depends on past records. Familiarity with fellow decision-makers is a definite plus. The choice of these personalities is thus in itself part of the measures, together with the reforms that they are called to implement.

And here we come to the core of the problem. For all the injections of goodwill, honeymoon effects and the glittery eyes that the sole mention of their two names will produce, the record of Profs Papademos and Monti will be measured by how much they will be able to deliver. It is not difficult to predict the solutions they are likely to propose; the key question is whether they will be able to put them into practice. This in turn will depend to a large extent on the room for manoeuvre that the political actors that underpin their legitimacy will extend to them. While this is further evidence that the developments in Greece and Italy are well within the boundaries of democracy, one only has to hope that the main parties in the two countries have learnt their lesson and are prepared to put aside their mutual acrimony and rally behind the technocrats' flag to help put their states back on track. That in itself would be a huge achievement with long-term consequences.