Looking ahead *Mayor Melfi has funded sports programs and a physiotherapy clinic, but he worries about the lack of opportunity for his town's youth*

the formation of a caretaker grand coalition. It is a sad day indeed for democracy when smart people start pulling for both sides to lose.

But there's another bad omen. Calabria and the south are conspicuously absent from the national agenda. Only in passing does the region feature in campaign speeches, and there are few premium spots for southerners on the political parties' parliamentary-candidate lists. True commitment to solving the problems of the "Mezzogiorno"—as Italy's eight southernmost regions are known—is clearly not considered a vote getter. Yet for reasons that transcend geography, turning around the south ought to be Italy's most pressing national priority. Youth unemployment in the Mezzogiorno is a staggering 36%; and between 1991 and 2005, according to one recent study, the Interior Ministry dissolved 154 local city councils in the area because of Mob infiltration. These conditions have caused a steady exodus of the region's most promising youth to points north and abroad.

Too often, Italian politicians have addressed the south as an isolated regional problem: some say too much public money is frittered away there, while others say the 14 million southerners among Italy's population of 59 million need more support. That's all beside the point, says Domenico Cersosimo, an economics professor at the University of Calabria. "We shouldn't see this as a country divided in two," he says. "The maladies of the Mezzogiorno are the maladies of Italy. It's just a question of degree: what is gray in Italy is black in the south." Indeed, entrenched nationwide ills like tax evasion, cumbersome bureaucracy and a self-serving political class are of a piece with the south's blight—crime and blatant corruption. Neither the public nor private sectors have been modernized in Italy, as they have been elsewhere in Europe, explains Fabrizio Barca, a senior Italian Economy Ministry official. "The north has found ways to compensate for this, and can be competitive in spite of the state of country," he says. "It is the north that is the anomaly, not the south. Rome and its ministries operate like the south. Fixing the south means fixing Italy."

Honorable Men

AMENDOLARA OFFERS A TINY BLIP OF HOPE on the otherwise bleak map of Calabria. Current local leaders have pushed to maximize the town's tourist potential and improve living conditions for residents. Beginning in 2001, Mayor Mario Melfi, a former union leader, implemented a municipal program under the grand slogan: "Amendolara wants to be in Italy, in Europe, in peace." Funded by $3 million a year in local property taxes and $630,000 in revenue from traffic tickets—plus additional grants from Rome and Brussels—the town has offered financial incentives and improved infrastructure to attract private businesses. The mayor's program lured the town's first local bank and four-star hotel, promoted the uncovering of pre-Roman archaeological treasures, and led to the establishment of scuba and sailing schools. Thanks to local efforts, Amendolara has managed to renovate the historic city center, open a state-of-the-art physiotherapy center, and step up environmental efforts like recycling.

On the strength of those initiatives, Melfi was re-elected in 2006 by a 15 percentage point margin over his closest rival. Talk to the locals and you hear the rare sound of southerners pleased with the direction in which their town is headed. One morning in March, Pasquale Salandria, taking a break from his work on a city clean-up crew, gestures toward two new seaside cafés and a disco. "Ten years ago there was almost nothing here," he says. Indeed, the town of 3,000 now seems to strike a nice balance between dynamism and coastal pleasantness, favoring local sports facilities, for instance, over outsized tourist lodgings.

Still, it would be a mistake to get seduced entirely by the mayor's efforts, or by the good-life charms of the town's refurbished 11th century chapel, homemade salami and Mediterranean breeze. For Amendolara's residents are still short on opportunities. Melfi himself says a lack of industry, large-scale agriculture and sufficient air and highway connections means that poverty and unemployment are bound to persist. "We're not some kind of 'happy island,'" he says. "We've got many of the same problems as the rest of Calabria. Too many young people are packing their bags, with their college diploma inside." Indeed, the quaint face that Amendolara, like much of Italy, puts on for visitors often hides the nation's great plague: wasted potential.

Take the street cleaner, Salandria. He has spent the last decade on temporary public-works contracts—deemed "socially useful" jobs by a state welfare