

The Poetry of Politics

George De Stefano (November 19, 2010)



Puglia's president and Italian leftist leader Nichi Vendola envisions "a better Italy"

"There is a better Italy," asserted Nicola "Nichi" Vendola, the president of Italy's Puglia region, during a November 17 appearance at New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli Marimò.

The "better Italy" he evoked was not only a nation without Silvio Berlusconi as its head of state but also one that was free of "Berlusconism," a toxic mix of neoliberal economics and right-wing populism that, he warned, could outlast Italy's embattled leader.

Vendola, 52, is the rising star of Italy's Left, a longtime communist who also is openly gay. Born in Terlizzi, a village near Bari, Vendola, like his parents, was a member of the Italian Communist Party. (He joined its youth federation when he was fourteen.) As a university student, he wrote his dissertation on the gay poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, whom he still frequently quotes. He was a journalist with the Communist Party newspaper L'Unità while also a leader of Arcigay, Italy's



major gay rights organization.

After the breakup in 1991 of the Pci (Italian Communist Party), Vendola co-founded Rifondazione comunista (Communist Refoundation). In 1992, he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Italy's Parliament. He chaired the chamber's Anti-Mafia Commission, distinguishing himself as a forceful opponent of Italy's criminal syndicates. In 2008, he left Rifondazione after losing a power struggle for its leadership. A year later, he became the leader of a new political party, Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà (Left, Ecology, and Freedom Party).

Many observers regard Vendola not only as a leader of his nation's fractious Left but as a potentially viable candidate for prime minister. The likelihood of that occurring in a politically center-right and culturally conservative country like Italy might seem remote. Nevertheless, Nichi Vendola is a unique and gifted politician who has surprised doubters before. In 2005, he confounded the naysayers by defeating (albeit narrowly) the candidate of Berlusconi's center-right coalition and becoming Puglia's president. He was re-elected this year, with 73 percent of the vote.

Vendola is a poet who has published several books of his verse, and he has brought a poetic sensibility to the campaign trail and to governance. During this year's electoral campaign, his slogan was, "Poetry is in the facts." That sensibility was evident during his talk at Casa Italiana. Vendola, wearing a gray suit with a red tie, his customary gold earring in his left ear, spoke in broad, thematic strokes, largely forgoing the specifics of public policy and political strategy.

Speaking with passion and humor, and often responding at considerable length to the questions posed by the event's moderator and two Italian journalists, Vendola was enthusiastically received by an overflow crowd consisting mainly of Italians and Italian expatriates. Italy today, he said, is ruled by leaders "who have no sense of mission, no sense of decorum." International media coverage of Berlusconi's government has highlighted the numerous, recurring sex scandals, fostering an image of Italy as a brothel ruled by a flamboyant billionaire pimp. This focus on scandal and corruption ignores how badly Italy and its people are suffering under Berlusconiism. Unemployment is high, with many Italians eking out a living on the precarious black market. Racism, xenophobia, and various forms of intolerance, including homophobia, are widespread. The Berlusconi government neglects the nation's cultural assets: opera houses are closing, there have been massive budget cuts to the nation's museums, and antiquity sites, including Pompeii, are deteriorating for lack of funding.

"Italy is becoming a postcard telling tales of the past," Vendola observed.

Vendola pointed to some major structural shifts in Italian society that have occurred in recent decades. Families, he said, used to comprise three generations: grandparents, parents, and children, often living under the same roof or at least nearby. This family structure, which he called a microcosm of society, fostered intergenerational solidarity and the transmission of culture and values. Today's Italian family is more of a nuclear unit focused on consumption, with the elderly increasingly being institutionalized or cared for by non-family members, often undocumented immigrants.

Changes in city life also have had a negative impact; urban dwellers are now more concentrated in peripheral areas, where public services, including transportation, are often poor and unreliable.

Vendola observed that although the Italian Constitution links freedom and work ("Italy is a democratic republic founded on labor"), in today's Italy "finance is now at the center stage," calling all the shots in the labor market. Under the neoliberal, market- and finance-oriented Berlusconi government, workers have little freedom and little work. His communist history notwithstanding, Vendola is not opposed to markets. He has criticized, in fact, excessive state involvement in southern Italy's economy as "Brezhnevism." He has geared his administration's policies towards the development of local infrastructure, including small-scale agriculture, and small and medium-sized factories producing textiles, clothing, footwear, and food products. He also promotes Puglia's culture and great scenic beauty as economic assets. Vendola is an ardent environmentalist, and under his leadership, Puglia's renewable energy sector has grown substantially. The political journalist Doug Ireland reported that investors attending a recent international conference on solar power cited Puglia as the most attractive region of southern Italy because "of its less cumbersome bureaucracy,



streamlined by Vendola.”

Vendola said at Casa Italiana that although he accepts the market, the problem in Italy is that “it has become the only principle governing society.” Politics must govern the market, he asserted. “But now the market is everything and politics is like a notary” that validates the market.

Countering “Berlusconism”

Puglia’s president criticized the Italian Left for failing to understand and effectively respond to Berlusconi. The leftist parties, he said, at first regarded the Milanese entrepreneur as a charlatan who would be no more than a temporary irritant. This attitude “underestimated the importance of Berlusconi’s beliefs.” The Left needs “to study the complex machinery of Berlusconism,” an ideology that purports to be dynamic and progressive and whose appeal to Italian voters has proved surprisingly resilient.

Politics, Vendola observed, requires “narratives,” compelling visions that inspire the public. Berlusconi’s narrative, though regressive, was effective. “Berlusconi didn’t only win elections,” Vendola noted. He also “captured the imagination” of voters. Italy’s Left has been unable to devise a persuasive counter-narrative to Berlusconi’s. Vendola evoked Antonio Gramsci in emphasizing the necessity of waging a cultural struggle against Berlusconism. “I want to win the larger war of changing the culture because if we don’t it’s not a genuine victory,” regardless of whether the Left wins at the polls.

Vendola said that although the Berlusconi government’s days were numbered, its leader having lost his parliamentary majority, an “alternative majority” has not yet emerged. The Left has endured “a long season” of defeat, he noted. Still, Vendola is the most popular politician of the Left opposition, as polls have shown. He has declared his candidacy to lead the opposition in the next parliamentary elections.

Turning to the “southern question,” the enduring structural inequality between Italy’s north and south, Vendola decried the notion, promulgated by the Lega Nord (Northern League), that the southern regions live off the wealth generated in the north. The north’s prosperity since World War II, he noted, could not have been achieved without the southern Italians who migrated to work in the factories of Milan, Turin, and Genoa.

Vendola noted that the national government has invested great amounts of capital in southern Italian industry. The government built a massive steel factory in Taranto, a city in Puglia, and auto manufacturing plants near Naples, among other industrial enterprises. Vendola said that this model of economic development was based on the “defective” idea that development for the Mezzogiorno should imitate the north. Instead of large industrial plants, Vendola suggested that economic development should follow the model he has promoted in Puglia.

Nichi Vendola also has pioneered new forms of civic participation. He has built a nationwide base of support through “le fabbriche di Nichi” – Nichi’s factories – local groups comprising mainly young people and those Doug Ireland calls “disappointed exiles from the tepid, arteriosclerotic traditional left.” The factories, said Vendola, attract Italians who “want to reconstruct a sense of the public good.” They generate ideas for political campaigns, but they are not mere electoral committees. They instead incubate ideas and proposals that they share through a Facebook group and in offline encounters.

One factory project, “guerilla gardening,” emerged from Puglia and subsequently spread to other parts of Italy. Young people, equipped with garden tools and seedlings, created public gardens from abandoned urban spaces that were full of garbage. “Public places should be beautiful and welcoming,” Vendola said.

The grassroots factories, besides generating creative and beneficial projects, no doubt will be an asset to Vendola’s national electoral campaign.

Vendola and the Vatican



Nichi Vendola clearly has the vision, talent, and commitment to revivify and lead Italy's Left. Whether he can be elected Italy's leader is another question. An Italian friend told me that on the radical Left, no one cares that Vendola is gay. However, the votes of the "sinistra radicale" won't be enough. He'll have to win the support of center-left voters, and not a few of them are Catholics who share the Vatican's antipathy to homosexuality. Moreover, the Vatican, under the leadership of ultra-conservative Pope Benedict XVI, has been demonizing gay people with hateful rhetoric and aggressively opposing all gay rights proposals because they supposedly represent an unacceptable "moral relativism."

Queried by an audience member about the Vatican's interference in Italian politics, Vendola sidestepped the question. An avowed Catholic, albeit of the Pax Christi/liberation theology variety, he distinguished between Christianity and the dictates of the Vatican. He also said that he hoped the Vatican someday would apologize for its homophobia as it has for its historic anti-Semitism, a remark that earned one of the strongest ovations of the evening.

One wants more from Vendola on this issue. A left-wing gay politician might reasonably profess Catholicism. But how can he not be anti-clerical, or at least speak out forcefully against the Vatican's anti-gay politicking? Vendola instead has said things like, "I have always been Catholic and gay, I have never concealed this and I refuse to adopt feelings of guilt. It is easier to talk about this with priests than with politicians."

Marc Alan Di Martino, a writer and blogger with dual American and Italian citizenship who lives in Rome, has offered some acute criticism of Vendola's stance.

"Instead of looking the homophobic dogma of his Church in the eye and challenging it, he clips his sails to the prevailing winds," writes Di Martino. "I'd love to see an Italian politician courageous enough to stand up to the unlovable Vatican. I bet a lot of disenfranchised Italian voters would support that, too. It might finally give them the voice they've been denied for so long by cowardly hypocrites prepared to steamroll democracy every time the pope hiccups the word 'relativism.'"^f [2]

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