

Blood, TV and Tears

Judith Harris (December 07, 2011)

“Blood and tears” was what Premier Mario Monti warned would be in store for angst- and debt-ridden Italy, and so it is, with a prime time TV turn thrown in for good measure. And by the way, those who thought Winston Churchill was the first to use this seminal phrase demanding sacrifice in the national interest are in the wrong. The first among the emulators (Theodore Roosevelt before Churchill) was none other than—appropriately for this 150th anniversary celebration of Italian unification—Giuseppe Garibaldi, who called upon the revolutionary nationalists in Rome on July 2, 1849, to offer up their “blood, toil, tears and sweat.”

ROME – On Tuesday, Dec. 6, Monti did a gig on RAI TV Channel 1 as a guest of none other than telehost Bruno Vespa, whose program *Porta a Porta* has been until now the sycophantic soapbox platform for the gone but not forgotten former Premier Silvio Berlusconi. “Greece shows what could have happened to Italy,” Monti told viewers, with the risk of salaries left unpaid. “We have spent the accumulated wealth of the past without creating new wealth. We were three months from disaster. Despite it all it’s better this way.”

The very fact that Monti would accept to appear with Vespa raised plenty of hackles on the left, but in the event Vespa assumed the unusual, for him, image of the non-interfering host who hovered solicitously over the seated Monti. Perhaps disappointingly to the usual old dears who favor RAI Uno, Monti was thoroughly professorial, reasonable and dull as a doorknob. “It’s an economics lesson, and Monti is putting me to sleep,” muttered the customarily stalwart British journalist who watched the performance with me, just before nodding off. “Pickle meets Vaseline,” commented an acerbic pundit, which I take it to mean Sourpuss (Vespa) meets Smoothie (Monti).

The day had begun with a bumper crop of sour pickles. Within the first few minutes of hearing the radio news that morning I was told (1) that the marking “bio” on 10% of Italian food products is fraudulent; (2) that prosecutors are asking for the arrest on Mafia charges of a former Berlusconi government undersecretary who also has responsibility for the Berlusconi party organization in the Campania region; and (3) that the Auditel ratings showing TV audience shares have been fiddled to favor the sextet of RAI and Berlusconi channels at the expense of others.

In his tele-marketing lecture Professor Monti reminded viewers that he and his team had put together a package in just seventeen days although thirty-five days was the average for previous governments. He reiterated the key points he had already made in speaking to the separate houses of Parliament and to the Foreign Press Association: restoration of a tax on first homes, to be calculated upon a notably higher tax base; a price hike at the gas pump; the gradual increase of the pensionable age; and a reduction of the provincial bureaucracy, the equivalent of counties. To date the most controversial measure regards pension checks of or above E 1000 (\$1,348), which will not henceforth be adjusted for inflation. Estimating inflation at 3%, in three years the pension will lose one-tenth of its value. Never mind said Monti, “When I realized what we had to do—when I understood that we’d be cutting pensions in the low range, I felt we had to ask people to make sacrifices. I am sure the Italians will understand.”

Really? One thing they understand is that, in order to ensure the votes of Berlusconi’s deputies on the right in a forthcoming vote of confidence proclaimed by Berlusconi himself, the Monti program



makes no mention of a wealth tax nor of an income tax hike. The exorbitant number and salaries (as compared with those in other European countries and the US) paid to the 1,000 MPs and senators remain untouched. In a forthcoming redistribution, Italian TV frequencies will be handed out free of charge rather than for pay; vaunting three networks, Berlusconi's TV empire will benefit particularly. Not least, the Catholic Church in Italy similarly benefited from the Monti cabinet's decision not to halt the tax-free status accorded to income-producing church properties. This is compromise with a capital "C," and one reason is fear of the markets' possible negative reaction if Monti's cabinet took on Big Money. The justification is that, if the market panic continues, everyone, including the lower middle class pensioners, will suffer.

Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, Italy's big three national unions reacted negatively and called for short strikes to take place next week. This is a modest enough reaction, but it tends to make the union leaders look like spoilers, unwilling to contribute their blood, toil, tears and sweat for the national interest. But the fact remains that today's unions represent primarily Italy's aging and pensioned labor force, in which those with no hope of earning future income see themselves as being required to bite the bullet while the really rich enjoy a free ride.

And perhaps this awareness of the difficulties the elderly pensioners will face explains why, during Monti's presentation of his program at a press conference, his Labor Minister Elsa Fornero was outlining the program when she literally gulped back tears when she had to speak the word "sacrifice." Monti stepped in to finish her thought as Fornero pulled herself together. Feminists were angry: why must women in politics go weepy? All were asking why Fornero, who is like Monti himself a distinguished academic, had burst into tears on live TV: was it her deep pain for the working-class? Was she simply out of her depth when facing the press? Was she reacting to provisions rammed down her throat during the unfamiliar give-and-take of the political process ("if we hit the rich too hard, we're out of a job")? Was she, like many listeners, upset that Monti keeps hailing his predecessor as if Berlusconi had not contributed to the present mess ("three months from disaster")? Or was she simply exhausted from dickering and bickering endlessly into the night with the sober but oh-so-verbose Monti and company?

For the voters, all this is disorienting. On the independent TV Channel La Sette's Monday night weekly review of political opinion, the total of those who plan to abstain from voting, turn in blank ballots or simply have no idea for whom they would vote has reached 50%, or half the electorate. Fulvio, our local fisherman, said this morning that Montanelli had wisely once said, "Hold your nose and vote." But today, said Fulvio, "I'd need a gas mask."

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