

Berlusconi Meets Obama. And We Fear Another Gaffe...

Judith Harris (June 16, 2009)



On Monday, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi met with President Obama at the White House. We were all waiting for another embarrassing gaffe to add to the long list of Mr. B's malapropisms. Let's recall some of them...

ROME. Like many Italians, many of us born outside the country but who live in, delight in, pay taxes in and vote in Italy, were filled with apprehension. Media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, president of the Council of Ministers, was to meet with U.S. President Barack Obama at the White House Monday. Would there be some embarrassing gaffe to add to the long list of Mr. B's malapropisms? One hoped not—but then, if it happened, we could give a horrified giggle of discomfit. In a way, this was political schadenfreude at its worst—potential enjoyment of one's own humiliation as an Italian lover.

There was no lack of precedents. The Premier offended countless Italians and America

s when he described the newly elected Obama as tall, good-looking and “sun-tanned”—“a compliment,” Mr. Berlusconi later explained, though most of us here recognized this way of speaking as racism with a wink of the eye under a gloss of Sixties-speak, and most definitely out of place. Mr.



Berlusconi also made Tony Blair uncomfortable, as his lawyer wife Cherie recently told the British press, by appearing in a bandana head-scarf when the Blairs visited Sardinia. Photographers were nearby, and, "My husband pushed me between him and Mr. Berlusconi," Cherie said, "and whispered, 'If the British press sees me next to him with that bandanna, I'm in trouble.'"

If you want to read more, just Google "Berlusconi gaffes," and dozens pop up.

Well, the good news is, based on speed reading of the official White House verbatim account of Monday's meeting between the two heads of state, that all went well, without a gaffe or blooper. Indeed, the Premier spoke with an unusual amount of grace.

Elsewhere this has not been the case, even recently. While addressing young industrialists a few days ago Mr. Berlusconi, photographed between two women, clowned, "I'm alone with them, and neither is a minor." The joking reference was obviously intended to defuse his wife's public allegations that he has been involved in unspecified flirtations with teenage girls. But such cheesy attempts at humor are embarrassing to listeners—a little like a street beggar in a very undeveloped country putting his finger into a sore so that you will pity him.

Mr. Berlusconi does not need our pity. Although he likes to point out that he is a victim, he is the single most powerful man in Italy, and the richest since the early 1990's.

The man who deserves our pity is his young lawyer, Nicolò Ghedini, however. Ghedini today was listed in an Italian daily as among the five MPs least present and active in the entire Parliament. As Mr. Berlusconi's personal lawyer, poor Ghedini has been extremely busy and active, including on TV shows, where his arguments often begin and end with, "Ma va, ma va, ma va" (Get on with you, dork). One of his recent actions was to prohibit publication of photographs by a Sardinian photographer of Mr. Berlusconi's personal guests arriving at an airport and of these same guests, mostly young and attractive, lolling about the Premier's villa in bathing suits; one chick was topless (admittedly, this is not terribly scandalous; topless female bathers can be gawked at on many an Italian beach in August).

When the Spanish daily El Pais published the photographs, attorney Ghedini made the legal point that the Italian injunction against publication had universal application. Now that is an interesting legal construct, and in its way a remarkable gaffe. For if Italian injunctions have universal application, then an injunction issued in Indonesia or Indiana (consider the Mann Act) would apply here. What is disturbing is not that this is a gaffe: it is a reckless perversion of law, from the country whose ancient law systems are the basis for all European legal systems.

In a polite allusion to Mr. Berlusconi's current problem with scandals, the White House, an aide pointed out starchily, is not interested in personal questions. Mr. Berlusconi's Hugh Hefner-style New Year's Eve party attended by fifty playmates was definitely personal, but such twisting of the law solely for media purposes (Ghedini surely knows that he was talking legal nonsense), the constant bringing of law suits that make news briefly and then are dropped, the time wasted on legal defensive posturing instead of dealing with the economic crisis, go far beyond "gaffes." The personal becomes a time-consuming smokescreen for a lack of needed action.

President Obama was not the only international moment of excitement. Last week Colonel Gheddafi dropped in to Rome. The visit was marred when the President of the Chamber of Deputies Gianfranco Fini decided that the Libyan leader had gone too far by making Parliament wait over two hours for a planned meeting. Fini showed dignity by calling off the meeting, whereas at midnight the Premier dropped in to Gheddafi's Bedouin tent, set up in the garden at Villa Doria Pamphilj in Rome, to make amends. But in defending Parliament, that overly large but still important counterweight in the balance of powers, Fini stood out like a statesman. Who'd have thought it? Who would have thought that Fini, a man whose political career began on the far right, would be giving lessons in democracy?



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