

Treading the Muddy Political Waters

Judith Harris (June 25, 2011)



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ROME -Voting in three separate elections this May and June, Italians gave a black eye to the center-right government headed by the London Economist's favorite Italian politician, Silvio Berlusconi. First, in scattered cities and townships throughout Italy in May and then in run-offs in June, government coalition parties lost city councils in a vast sampler that ranged from mountainous Piedmont to the sunburnt Southern islands. Confirming this, two weeks later, in an unexpectedly huge turnout, voters overwhelmingly rejected four bills dear to the government's heart. The most important to the nation was the adoption of a nuclear agenda; the most important to Berlusconi personally was a law that had provided him immunity from prosecution so long as he holds high office.

As a result of the trouncing, Berlusconi's ally in government, the truculent Northern League, went on



the verbal warpath, holding its annual meeting in an historic backyard (okay, a field) at Pontida near Brescia. Predictions beforehand were that, in his speech there, Bossi, said to be ailing and too tired to continue, would issue thunderbolts against Berlusconi, whom many in the Leghisti leadership blame for the obvious mass defections from their party during the referendum vote. Indeed, a recent poll showed that 55% of League voters dislike Berlusconi. Their favorite to replace him as Premier is the League's leading figure in government, Roberto Maroni, hailed at Pontida in a 15-foot-long banner as their candidate for Premier (see the photo of the banner in the June 20 www.Repubblica.it). Despite crowd calls demanding secession for the Padania area, the backyard rally was pacific—until now, anyway, with Bossi and Maroni reportedly at each other's throats. If little else, the Pontida rally showed how wrong predictions can be. Some of the best minds in Italy had drafted literally brilliant analyses of what Bossi would say, but in the event all were wrong, and Bossi did little but shrug his shoulders and tell a delighted Berlusconi to go on treading water.

And so he does, even though some of Berlusconi's best friends, caught on the phone by zealous magistrates in gossip mysteriously leaked to the press, have been loudly praising their leader in public while slinging mud at him in private. The women seem particularly guilty, reminding one that he who lives by the sword may die by the sword. The lissome Minister for the Environment Stefania Prestigiacomo was caught complaining that Berlusconi is "not intelligent." Worse from Berlusconi's point of view, at least, must be the ungrateful Daniela Santanché, caught saying that Berlusconi's wife has it right, and that he is "sick." In public Ms. Santanché has been his most ardent and loudest supporter, second only to his personal lawyer and MP Nicola Ghedini.

The newest Berlusconi faithful to be capturing the headlines is Luigi Bisignani, the alleged eminence grise accused of operating in the shadows to control Italian politics, finances and state radio-TV, with a finger in the military pie as well. Arrested June 15, Bisignani is the subject of 15,000 pages of court documents involving what is being called here the "P4" inquiry into underground lobbies. It might seem just another Italian scandal save that magistrates Henry John Woodcock and Francesco Curcio of Naples are investigating a possible link between wheeler-dealer businessman Bisignani and Gianni Letta, Berlusconi's right-hand man and de facto minister to the Roman Catholic church authorities. The term P4 is shorthand for secret power over the economy and over nominations to powerful state positions, including in state-owned media; the name evokes the secret renegade Masonic lodge known as the P2 ("P" for Propaganda) headed by Licio Gelli from circa 1969 through the 1980s. In phone taps Bisignani takes the credit for obtaining the government post for Santanché as undersecretary in charge of the amorphous office for the Enactment of the Government Program as well as the leader of the Movement for Italy, thanks—according to Bisignani in testimony to Woodcock and Curcio, only thanks to Bisignani himself.

Justice Minister Angelo Alfano gave a weak protest that the phone taps were costing taxpayers too much money, and Berlusconi himself has relaunched demands for a gag law to stop the leaks. Nevertheless the obvious pressure on the Premier gave photographers a Berlusconi field day. When Berlusconi had to spend a long morning defending himself in court in Milan last Monday, for the first time no little crowd of enthusiasts was there to wave kisses and banners of support. And in a cruel close-up a photographer caught a haggard and over-heated Berlusconi wiping his face so that his clean white linen hankie was all a-smear with orange makeup, à la Crusty the Clown.

All this suggested last week a government deep in trouble, and a few hoped that Tuesday's vote of confidence in Parliament (*verifica*) might reflect some of the dissatisfaction expressed clearly in the trio of votes in the past two months. But when push came to shove, the Berlusconi government actually increased its numerical consensus in the Chamber and Senate with 317 votes in favor—one more than before Gianfranco Fini's exit from the ruling coalition. A few still say that new elections lie just around the corner, but reason that November would be a fine time to bring down the government so that elections could be held next Spring, when the June setbacks are forgotten. On the other hand, Berlusconi—and not only he— continues to predict the government will go forward until the end of the legislature. The clash between the Premier and his economics czar Giulio Tremonti continues, aggravated by Tremonti's obvious ambitions to replace Berlusconi. By the same



token the League is also trying to elbow Berlusconi aside, to be replaced by Interior Minister Maroni. Hence the sense of treading water as each tries to drown, and to drown out, the other, in a triangular game of water polo.

In the meantime Renato Brunetta, a former economics professor who is Minister for the Public Administration and Innovation, alienated countless young Italians by stalking out of a meeting of the so-called precari, young people given short-term or no work contracts, meaning no social security or other benefits while earning under \$1,000 monthly for full-time work. “You’re the worst of Italy,” he sneered at a young woman trying to ask him a question. By way of reply to his arrogant indifference to the plight of the young, bright and underemployed (and I repeat, 30% of Italian university graduates are jobless), the mass Catholic weekly *Famiglia Cristiana* wrote in an editorial June 17, “This is an Italy that built illusions for fathers and sons, promising greater possibilities on the road to competition and infinite growth.... But the daily reality has shown this to be untrue. Today 30% of young families earn too little to be able to buy a house. Between the ages of 25 and 34 almost one worker out of four has an atypical contract, 60% of young people remain precariously employed after a year and one out of five is unemployed; the median salary for new graduates is of E 827.” (Statistics from ABI, CGIA, ISTAT and Bachelor respectively.)

The editorialist concluded with a sharp rap on the knuckles: “Perhaps you, Signor Minister, and the Government are not interested in this reality. Perhaps other things are on your mind [!] It doesn’t matter—go right on considering us the worst of Italy. We, who are tired of all this and indignant, will build a better future Italy.”

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