

Pimples, Warts & All. "Paint my Picture Truly Like Me!"

Judith Harris (January 26, 2014)



"Paint my picture truly like me," Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) told the artist about to paint his portrait, "pimples, warts, and everything as you see me." Is this what Silvio Berlusconi told Paul Stuart, the Sunday Times photographer famous for his realistic portraits? Italian commentators tend to agree that Stuart's less than flattering photographs published this Sunday usher in a new phase for the former Premier, who is back on the front pages thanks to his negotiations with Renzi over a new election law.

ROME - "Paint my picture truly like me," Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) told the artist about to paint his portrait, "pimples, warts, and everything as you see me." Is this what Silvio Berlusconi told Paul Stuart, the Sunday Times photographer famous for his realistic portraits? For it, Stuart and reporter John Follain traveled to Berlusconi's posh residence at Arcore outside Milan, where Berlusconi was staying with his 28-year-old fiancée Francesca Pascale, former Neapolitan beauty queen. What they found was Berlusconi, warts and all, or rather, crepe wrinkles, fatigue and all. The interview itself broke no new ground, but Italian commentators tend to agree that the less than flattering,



unretouched photographs published this Sunday did.

From face lifts to hair transplant, it is no secret that, particularly over the past decade, Berlusconi, who is now 77 years old, has made every effort to keep himself, or at least to make himself appear, as youthful as possible; Follain wrote that during the interview traces of face makeup were visible on Berlusconi's cheeks. Even so, the change of pace implied by the Sunday Times magazine front page photo suggests that the man who was premier for nine years, and who now risks house arrest or assignment to social services after conviction for fraud, is adopting a change of pace. Why? And what's going on?

It's not only the new facial candour, either, for Berlusconi is breathing life into his formerly dissolved political party Forza Italia by launching a bright young thing as its head, to the ill-disguised wrath of the old pols like Dennis Verdini, who had been Berlusconi's sidekicks until today. On Saturday Giovanni Toti, 45, resigned his job as TV announcer on one of Berlusconi's own channels to take over as "political counsellor" running Forza Italia.

The Partito Democratico (PD) is itself now headed by the even younger Matteo Renzi, Florentine mayor born in 1975. That party's wrinkles are now showing nevertheless, for last week Renzi too made a pilgrimage to Arcore to strike a deal with Berlusconi over revision of the hated "Porcellum" (pigsty) election law. Renzi returned triumphant, boasting that the deed is done. The proposed revisions are stalled at the moment over whether or not individual names will appear on ballots and how the constituency areas will be drawn up. This battle is to go before Parliament this week, but even before that predictably bitter debate begins, the Renzi-Berlusconi summit at Arcore has brought out the wrinkles in the PD itself. The party's only recently elected president, Gianni Cuperlo, resigned in a huff because in organizing the summit Renzi put the disgraced Berlusconi right back on the political center stage.

Those who defend Renzi point out, on the other hand, that in democracies including the US rival political organizations cooperate over important legislation. Less high mindedly, the Renzi-Berlusconi accord effectively shoved the truculent Beppe Grillo at least momentarily off stage, no mean feat. Grillo himself admitted this. Meeting with the Foreign Press Association in Rome Thursday, he said that "the only point of this [Berlusconi-Renzi] electoral reform proposal is to block us because we are a danger to the system." Typical of his more private meetings, Grillo dropped his wild man public persona and appeared quiet, friendly and reasonable, and rather wearily hinted that he may be getting tired of the political ruckus.

The problem is that the splintering of the PD is serious. On the one hand, if the deal with Berlusconi flops, it will take down with it Renzi himself and the government headed by Enrico Letta, of his same party, and will precipitate new elections. This is Renzi's weakness--but on the other hand this is also his strength. The PD and its quarrelsome minor party backers are still well ahead of Berlusconi's new party or even of a rightist coalition. The last thing any of them want right now is for new elections to be triggered--but who is holding the trigger finger?

In the background, needless to say, is Italy's troubled economy, one of the topics discussed at the World Economic Forum at Davos. More on this next week.

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