

## European Elections: Rhetoric High, Interest Low

Judith Harris (May 14, 2014)



As European elections loom, the rhetoric heats up. But public interest remains low even though the stakes are high. In the background are the continuing recession, judiciary evidence of corruption for Expo in Milan, and the hordes of immigrants who continue to arrive, on shabby boats via Libya, and to drown. Here's what some of the top leaders are saying or, rather, shouting during these final days before the vote May 25.

ROME - As European elections loom, the rhetoric heats up. In the background are the continuing recession, inevitably, but also disturbing judiciary evidence of corruption at Expo in Milan, of all places. In the political blame game the Euro is one of the baddies, while a major question is what is to be done about the hordes of immigrants from Asia as well as the Middle East and Africa, arriving on shabby boats via Libya. Here's what some of the top leaders are saying or, rather, shouting during these final days before the vote May 25.

As usual, the loudest is Beppe Grillo, head of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S). “If we win a few Eurodeputies more than the Partito Democratico, let’s get a million people and make a nice trip to Rome together. I’ll go to tell [President Giorgio] Napolitano to dissolve Parliament, and that he should move to Cesano Boscone” (That’s the town where former Premier Berlusconi is doing his half-day weekly bout of social work among Alzheimer patients as punishment for his mega tax-fraud crime.)

The arrests and stunning revelations by magistrates of serious corruption behind the crony contracts for building (or not building, work being behind deadlines) the structures for the Expo exposition site, which opens one year from now, continue to dominate daily headlines. At a meeting in Milan with Expo officials Tuesday, a shocked Matteo Renzi said bravely: “The state is greater and stronger than the thieves... Expo must become a point of pride.... We will not let those who steal be able to take away a piece of our future. Work will not stop. The thieves will stop.”

To this Grillo’s response was, “Shut it down.” Expo is simply “una puttanata” (slutty).

Berlusconi meanwhile is basking in revelations that he was the victim of a genuine international plot. In his new book, “Stress Test,” former Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner alleges that European countries (read: France, Germany, the UK) had ganged up to try to put the Berlusconi government out of business in hopes of salvaging the Italian economy.

To this Berlusconi commented: “It’s a lie that the country was on the edge of a precipice, and that there were no funds to pay old age pensioners and state employees. This story against me was circulated even though I was the very person defending national interests against certain proposals that instead would have been cozy for other states, as we saw when the man who succeeded me [Mario Monti] bowed down to those proposals....I resigned out of a sense of responsibility.”

According to The Daily Beast review of the Geithner book, at a G-20 meeting in 2011, “Europeans were pushing the White house to get involved in pushing bunga bunga legend and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi out of office. ‘We can’t have his blood on our hands,’ responded Geithner, voicing his disapproval.”

If that was Geithner’s version, here is Gianfranco Fini’s curt response: “There was no plot. The government fell for other reasons. Berlusconi was very fragile, the coalition majority simply did not have the numbers [for a vote of confidence]. Everyone wanted to avoid Italy’s plummeting into a Greek-style bankruptcy.”

On the immigrants, the Northern League could hardly be silent. According to Matteo Salvini, federal secretary: “These deaths weigh on the conscience of the fools behind ‘Mare Nostrum’ [welfare aid to immigrants]. They build the illusions of thousands of desperados who risk death, as unfortunately we have seen, promising them that in Italy they’ll find a home, work, hope, a future.....



“We need to suspend ‘Mare Nostrum’ and invest there [in their countries] all that money we’re throwing away here. Just as did our Interior Minister Maroni, who gave several billion euros to Libya to build infrastructure and guarantee a future there.”

In so saying, however, Salvini ignores the fact that the new hordes of immigrants flooding Catania and Lampedusa are more likely to be refugees from war and religious persecution than the economic immigrants of past years. Of the cadavers fished from the sea in past days, the majority are of women and children.

A post script: a handful of different pollsters May 10 agree that the distance between the Partito Democratico of Matteo Renzi and the Movimento 5 Stelle of Grillo may be shrinking somewhat, but that the PD is still safely in charge. With between 32% and 34% of the vote, the PD remains well ahead of the M5S. Grillo’s is almost certainly Italy’s second largest party, but with no more than 24% of the vote. Berlusconi’s Forza Italia may sink blow 20%. Ipsos gives Berlusconi 19.5%; Demetra 17.8%; and Demos, 17.5%

Which of the smaller parties will obtain more than 4% is uncertain. The rightists around Interior Minister Angelino Alfano are expected to win just over 4% and the Northern League, about the same.

The real certainty is that voters’ interest is low. The non-voters or those who abstain may be over 40%.

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