

In Italian Politics, Too, It's Ladies' Day

Judith Harris (August 04, 2016)



Italy has never had a woman president, but women here are taking giant political steps. Among the most visible are Laura Boldrini, president of the Chamber of Deputies; Federica Mogherini, foreign affairs minister for the European Union (EU), Emma Bonino, former Italian foreign affairs minister; and two big-city mayors, Virginia Raggi of Rome and Chiara Appendino of Turin.

ROME -- Even as Hillary Clinton became the first woman to be a U.S. presidential candidate, the New Yorker magazine ran an article called "The Woman Card" by the influential Jill Lepore. As for Italy, this country has never had a woman president, but women are making political strides. Among the most visible are Laura Boldrini, president of the Chamber of Deputies; Federica Mogherini, foreign affairs minister for the European Union (EU), Emma Bonino, former Italian foreign affairs minister; and two big-city mayors, Virginia Raggi of Rome and Chiara Appendino of Turin.



Admittedly, it has hardly been a picnic for any of them, any more than for their male colleagues. Boldrini has been assaulted viciously by right-wingers, all of them male, who have been extremely nasty ever since her election in 2013. At that time the daily *Libero* wrote: "Let's lay a shroud over the president [Boldrini] before she lays one on us." From another rightwing daily, *Il Giornale*, came this bizarre gripe: "Leave in peace the women strippers."

Why they would write these escapes me, but worse was to come. Subsequently *Il Giornale* dubbed her "the teacher," intended as belittling. From Beppe Grillo's crowd came another rude insinuation: "What would happen if you found yourself alone with Boldrini in a car?" And from Grillo himself came the observation that, "She doesn't read what I say but, what's worse, she isn't capable of understanding it." Manlio De Stefano, one of the Grillini, went further, writing, "Boldrini is a zombie, a woman without dignity, who talks on TV newscasts with unworthy journalists."

Boldrini has also come under attack from the Northern League. In Oct. 2015 Gianluca Pini, a League deputy, called her "a goat" and "incapable." League boss Matteo Salvini (whose party incidentally is currently in stall mode) called her "poverina" (poor little thing) and compared her with a balloon doll. The very worst ran on Facebook August 1, where a small-time Northern League town councilwoman at Musile di Piave, near Venice wrote that, "Laura Boldrini is to be physically eliminated." Needless to say, this became a firestorm, and the article by Tommaso Ciriaco detailing these attacks won thousands of "likes" on the web. See [>>](#) [2]

In July 2014 Federica Mogherini was appointed by Italian Premier Matteo Renzi to succeed the UK's Catherine Ashton as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union (EU). Perhaps because Mogherini works out of Brussels rather than Rome, she has been relatively insulated from the day-to-day Italian political rough housing. Her work, however, is no less difficult than Boldrini's, for Mogherini is dealing with such crucial defence and security issues as the waves of migrants trying to reach Europe; the Iranian nuclear program, whose successful negotiation with the EU was in part thanks to her; and, these days, the EU's stance on ISIS. She is on record as having said last May that the EU will act in support of Libya.

Emma Bonino, 68, despite continuing her battle against cancer, remains the Grand Old Woman of Italian politics. She is a former Italian minister of foreign affairs, EU Commissioner, and founding board member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. She has also been a member of the European Parliament and an Italian senator, serving as its vice president from 2008 through 2013. During the same period she was also president of the Senate's Commission on Equal Opportunities. She has received various prizes for her work for women's rights and humanitarian causes, and in 2013 the Italy-USA Foundation gave her its prestigious America Award.

Virginia Raggi was one of the two women big-city mayors who were elected representing Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), and there is little doubt that her party bosses, and they are bosses, are following her every move because this is their first trial in action. The problem is that she inherited a poisoned chalice that almost defies description. Any mayor in any country would be hard pressed to deal with her almost 8,000 city employees and with the 5,000 tons of rubbish the capital generates daily. Piles of rubbish continue this summer to litter even some of the better neighborhoods of central Rome, such as Parioli and Prati.

"In three weeks the capital will be cleaned up," she has said. And in fact on the plus side, 43% of



Rome's rubbish is now differentiated, compared with under 25% just five years ago. However, apparently due to the lack of trucks, oversized rubbish, such as old sofas, broken refrigerators and even cupboards dumped into the street, is unlikely be removed until October. Even worse are the daily revelations of gigantic kickbacks and overly generously paid consultancies, currently under investigation by magistrates, which may lie behind the rubbish pile-up. Dealing with migrants, including underage unaccompanied children, is another difficult item on her agenda.

By comparison, Turin mayor Chiara Appendino, 32, who like Raggi was elected by the M5S, was handed a fairly easy task, at least at the outset in June. First, the capital of Piedmont has under 900,000 inhabitants by comparison with Rome, whose population is estimated, depending upon who's counting, to be from 3 to 5 million. In addition, the previous Turin center-left administrations led by Sergio Chiamparino (June 2001 - May 2011) and Piero Fassino (2011 - 2016), both of the Partito Democratico (PD), have not left her a heritage of scandal.

On the other hand, Turin has always been the locomotive of Italian manufacturing, beginning with Fiat, but manufacturing worldwide is in crisis as automation tends to make factory workers, even low-paid migrant workers, obsolete. Besides unemployment, a Facebook poll of the problems she faces lists "too many migrants," to Roms, microcriminality, pollution, the neglected city outskirts, and schooling.

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