

Mr. Berlusconi: Ganging up, but who cares?

Judith Harris (January 23, 2011)



Despite the crescendo of scandal worthy of an 18th century Turkish sultan, Mr. Berlusconi remains the most charismatic and popular politician in Italy. ... True democracy, he believes, comes unmediated, and straight from the people. It is revealed by public opinion polls, piazza demonstrations and, if need be, via a new election, the last recourse. Meanwhile Berlusconi's political staff are looking to the U.S. Tea Party for fresh ideas about recruiting, organization and themes.

ROME - They are ganging up on Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi: magistrates, TV talk showmen, tell-all eye-witness prostitutes confirming sex-for-money, moderate politicoes like Pier Ferdinando Casini, the Italian Roman Catholic bishops and even, if only by discreetly advising more attention to morality in public affairs, Pope Benedict XVI himself. Obviously a beleaguered Mr. Berlusconi is outraged, and obviously his legal staff of 86 are busy as wasps. And yet, as Mr. Berlusconi declared in a national TV panegyric to himself last week, he has no intention of resigning and even less of obeying a summons to appear before magistrates. Why not? Ah, there's the question.

During this incredible week we have seen teenage party girls giving weepy, amusing and literally unbelievable TV interviews ("Yes, he gave me \$10,000, but never touched me" and, albeit phone



tracks prove otherwise, "I spent the evening there only once"). We have seen a condominium administrator issue eviction notices to a bevy of young females who frequented Berlusconi parties and were living, altogether and apparently thanks to his generosity, in a building that was the equivalent of a harem. Co-tenants of the harem complained that they were lowering the tone of their building.

Nevertheless, whatever the thick of scandal and the thin of government action, "Some analysts are willing to bet that even a conviction would not change the forecasts. If people voted today the Cavaliere [Berlusconi] would have a good chance of winning," Ugo Magri wrote in *La Stampa* Friday. Indeed, independent polls show that Mr. Berlusconi's Partito della Libertà (PdL) claims the loyalty of 32% of those queried, a figure that reconfirms the party as Italy's largest. Mr. Berlusconi himself claims that fully 50% of the Italians continue to support him personally. His pollsters of preference moreover report that, despite the crescendo of scandal worthy of an 18th century Turkish sultan, he lost a mere 0.6%. Not least, an Ipsos poll commissioned by a respectable TV talk show *Ballarò* showed that, when asked which politician would be the most capable and charismatic prime minister, Berlusconi led the list at 17%. The only one who came close was newcomer governor of the Puglia region Nichi Vendola at 11%. Conservative leader Gianfranco Fini lagged behind at 7%, in a feeble showing matched by the leader of the Partito Democratico (PD) Pierluigi Bersani. The others, from Antonio Di Pietro to Emma Bonino and Umberto Bossi, logged in at under 3%.

The fact is that Mr. Berlusconi remains the most charismatic and popular politician in Italy. Whatever the atmosphere of dancing on the deck of the *Titanic*, however great the dismay among family-oriented Catholics here, the pro-Berlusconi public is rock solid with those who fear increased taxes or a loss of state contributions of one kind or another (pensions, cushy bureaucratic jobs, construction work). And it still matters less to the Italian voting public than does fear of the old, unappealing and still quarreling leftist establishment.

These rock-solid voters are described as stay-at-home TV viewers, female, up in years, scantily educated and geographically Central-Southern. They believe—truly believe—that the goings-on as leaked from judiciary documents simply cannot be true because they defy belief. Silvio (they think of him on first-name basis) is therefore a victim of cruel gossip, to be protected, not further villified, and shame on those pointing the finger at him.

The medium fosters this message, to the point that RAI President Paolo Garimberti went on record criticizing the director of RAI Tg1, Augusto Minzolini, for dodgy reporting of the investigation into what is being called "Rubygate". "Rai cannot and should not be used for media exploitation that risks bringing about a very ugly result--people being exasperated at the conflict underway in this country," Garimberti complained, pointedly mentioning "omissions." "I have the utmost respect for the autonomy and editorial freedom for the directors of the [TV and radio] channels, but a rule that cannot be compromised is that information must be complete."

The missing news seems to be that Ruby Rubacuore (Ruby Heart-stealer, a Moroccan teenager) had asked Mr. Berlusconi for E 5 million. Minzolini's response was that the network's reporting was correct, but that "Garimberti was not very alert." However, the RAI editorial committee of journalists also protested at missing information that would leave viewers uninformed.

Does anyone care? Less than one might think. As a *Corriere della Sera* editorialist has pointed out, a factor in maintaining Mr. Berlusconi's popularity is the public's loss of the quasi-mystical reverence it had for the magistrates during the heyday of Tangentopoli. This gives Mr. Berlusconi free rein to thumb his nose at the Milan team of magistrates who have summoned him to explain his relations with the then under-age Moroccan girl known here as Ruby. He dismisses the magistrates as publicity-seeking leftists, evil elements within a vindictive bureaucracy. Who needs them? True democracy, he believes, comes unmediated, and straight from the people. It is revealed by public opinion polls, piazza demonstrations and, if need be, via a new election, the last recourse, and one



that Mr. Berlusconi's opponents fear perhaps more than he does.

Meanwhile, the walkup to a handful of local elections in May is already underway, and Mr. Berlusconi's spin professors are cranking up a new message that will appear on gigantic billboards. The thrust—interesting in case national general elections actually take place in March, two years ahead of time—will be to identify protection of Mr. Berlusconi with protection of Italy itself, along the lines of "Forza, Silvio, only you can defend Italy." Already his political staff are looking to the U.S. Tea Party for fresh ideas about recruiting, organization and themes, in words like fighter, radical, individualist and conservative.

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