



Letter from Rome

A State of Embarrassment

Conor Deane

Claretta Petacci, Benito Mussolini's last mistress, once remarked: 'It is not hard to govern Italians; it's pointless.'

It is a widely-held belief that the current Prime Minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, is determined to make a fresh attempt at this pointless task, but this is not true.

Berlusconi leads a coalition made up of his own political party, Forza Italia, the anti-immigrant Northern League and the National Alliance, a party that, in its original configuration as the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), had been excluded from power throughout the post-War period for its continued espousal of Fascism. Under the new and more moderate leadership of Gianfranco Fini, the National Alliance has tasted power for the first time with Berlusconi. It is certainly not a coalition of the tolerant, but this does not make it autocratic.

Since returning to power in 2001, Berlusconi has pushed through several bills that legalize the graft that he and his business associates have committed, or else that transform what had been criminal offences into technical misdemeanours. In December 2003, he attempted to enact a wide-ranging bill that is so blatantly favourable to his own extensive media interests that President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who usually avoids controversy, refused to ratify it. Berlusconi has also devoted a lot of energy to excluding critics from the state broadcasting company, Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI). Foreign journalists are flabbergasted at the

suppression of the free press, and the ascent of the Fascists (the National Alliance) and rabid xenophobes (the Northern League). The western press is practically unanimous in its censure of Berlusconi, who dislikes them in return. He has a particularly bad relationship with that flagship of liberal dogma, *The Economist*.

Yet the belief that Berlusconi is trying to establish repressive government is misplaced. On the contrary, he is hardly interested in governing Italy at all. In this he differs quite markedly from his late political mentor, Bettino Craxi, who made a forceful and memorable attempt to do so, and managed to stay in office for a remarkably long time (from August 1983 to April 1987, with a brief hiatus in 1986). Craxi did not suffer Mussolini's (or Claretta Petacci's) fate and end up hanging from a lamppost in Milan, but he was hounded out of office and then out of the country to die in exile. Why should this have happened? After all, his partners in crime and government stayed behind and weathered the storm. His cabinet colleague Giulio Andreotti, seven times Prime Minister, has become a respected elder statesman. Craxi's protégé, Berlusconi, was elected to office by the same Italian public whose outrage at the corruption that Craxi represented had seemed so implacable. If Craxi had simply looked after his own interests instead of also trying to govern, he might not have become such a hate figure.

Silvio Berlusconi with Cherie and Tony Blair, Sardinia, August 2004.
Photograph:
Associated Press

In conducting a campaign to diminish the powers of the judiciary and rival media organizations, Berlusconi is not showing dictatorial tendencies. He is merely fulfilling his own personal and professional ambitions. The RAI is the only serious competitor to Berlusconi's Mediaset group, and it would therefore be very surprising were he to treat it fairly. Similarly, in seeking to undermine the judiciary, Berlusconi is acting in a perfectly coherent manner. What businessman would not take the opportunity to legalize white-collar crime and legislate to destroy prosecution cases against himself, his business associates and company? Legalizing bribery and corruption is not unheard-of either; in the US it has been institutionalized under the name of lobbying. What with all the energy that he is expending on saving himself from the courts, running his companies and generally dodging the raindrops, Berlusconi has little time left to work on becoming the next Mussolini.

Berlusconi's interest in subverting the media and the judiciary has another cause: he really wants people to like him. This claim may invite scepticism from those who are suspicious of psychological profiling to explain political action but, in Berlusconi's case, it is more akin to a job description. His first profession was that of an entertainer. He started out as a crooner on cruise ships, with the current CEO of the Mediaset empire, Fedele Confalonieri, playing piano. When delivering a political speech, Berlusconi still adopts the position of a Sinatra-era singer: left hand clasping the microphone at chest-level, right arm stretched out in a histrionic gesture of feeling. At the end of 2003, Mario Apicella, a Neapolitan singer, released a new CD with fourteen new songs written by Berlusconi. To mark the Italian presidency of the European Union, Berlusconi had an album of his favourite Italian songs compiled and delivered to all the mayors in the country. Indeed, he now looks more like a crooner

than he did on the cruise ships. After the Italian presidency came to an ignominious end in December 2003, Berlusconi vanished for a month and came back with tighter skin and darker hair. When Tony and Cherie Blair chose to spend their summer holidays in 2004 in Berlusconi's Sardinian villa, built in defiance of planning law, their host appeared with a white bandana on his head. The purpose of the bandana was to cover the scars resulting from a hair transplant.

Berlusconi does not want to be booed off stage like his friend Craxi. Apart from his businesslike approach to defending his corporate interests, he is genuinely and personally offended at the accusations lodged against him. His offensive against the judiciary, one of the powers in Italy that holds the executive in check, invites two plausible interpretations. It may be deeply sinister that Berlusconi should be making such enormous legislative efforts to ensure that top office-holders such as, well, the Prime Minister, should be doubly immune from prosecution; or it may simply be that he is reacting to a sudden burst of bad manners from the magistrates who started to throw things at him while he was entertaining. From this perspective, Berlusconi is not so much gagging the judiciary as silencing a bunch of hecklers. If his audience has anything to say, they should have the decency to wait till he has finished his gig.

This is not just a flippant use of the metaphor of spectacle, because the belief that politics is spectacle is held by many Italians, the magistrates included. Although they loftily deny political motivation, Italian magistrates belong to institutionalized political movements, and judicial appointments are made on the basis of ideological affiliation.

On 12 November 2004, Ilda Boccasini, a prosecutor whose career as an anti-Mafia

magistrate earned her a reputation for fearlessness and ferocity, called for an eight-year prison sentence for Berlusconi. She made her demand in the course of the closing of the prosecution case in the ‘SME Trial’, which began in May 2003. Very briefly, the prosecution case is that in 1985 Berlusconi and his lawyer friend, Cesare Previti, who is also a Forza Italia MP and a former minister, bribed a judge, Renato Squillante, to block the take-over of SME, a state-sector food company, by a rival businessman. One of the lines of defence used by Berlusconi, co-defendant with Previti and seven others, was that this was a ‘victimless’ crime (he noted, for example, that no guns were used). Boccasini, however, argued that Berlusconi’s actions since the time of the offence (amongst which she included lying to the Italian public and becoming Prime Minister) did not give her any reason to mitigate the standard sentence for the corruption of a public official.

Berlusconi’s defence team and political allies were shocked and incredulous. The recurrent theme of the accusations Boccasini’s proposed sentence provoked in government circles was the political bias of the judiciary. The only person who took it calmly, with the weary resignation of the perpetually persecuted, was Berlusconi himself. He endures through this difficult time with the help of his friends and of his immunity from prosecution. He cannot be jailed or even arraigned unless the parliament that elected him Prime Minister can be persuaded to vote to remove his immunity from prosecution.

The tenet that a person is innocent until proven guilty is taken very seriously indeed in Italy. Judges may not refuse leave to appeal; so a defendant charged with a serious crime, a defendant who is wealthy and, especially, a defendant who belongs to both categories, will always appeal a conviction. Sometimes years can pass before the Court of Cassation (Appeals Court) re-

examines the case. If the defendant is found guilty again, s/he may appeal to the Supreme Court. Often, it takes so long for the Supreme Court to get around to hearing the case that the statute of limitations may have annulled the original offence as in the ‘SME Trial’ that ended in December 2004. The trick is not to be remanded in custody during the lengthy interval between conviction and appeal. The Scots have the verdict of ‘not proven’, but Italians have a far more nuanced version. A conviction by a court of first instance makes the defendant sort-of-guilty but not quite. It depends. If the defendant is appealing, in both senses of the word, then terms such as ‘guilty’ and ‘convicted’ are considered to be in bad taste. It becomes possible to speak of guilt only when the appeals process has been thoroughly exhausted.

Berlusconi’s war with the courts certainly raises serious issues of judicial independence. When he claims the judiciary is politicized, the Italian public recognizes this is essentially true. But this does not mean that the system is corrupt. In the Anglo-American system judges have the power to interpret laws with reference to individual cases; thus, there is no need in that system for a separate body to enforce the law of equity. Under the common-law system, judges are responsible for the decisions that create equity, and if this is to be acceptable to the public, they must also be assumed to be impartial and fair. Not so in Italy. The existence of a written code that attempts to cover as many specific instances as possible limits the interpretative powers of judges. As judges are not responsible for articulating what equity is, in this system their impartiality is less important. Rather, they are expected to be seen to apply the law as it already is. If the law is manifestly bad, they must apply it regardless. A bad law must be corrected by parliament, not by a wise judge. Equity, meanwhile, is supposed to be achieved by a synthesis of argument by the prosecution and the

defence. Essentially, this puts the defence on the same level as the prosecution, the defendant at the same level as the prosecutor. Given that judicial equity is not an option, both the prosecution and the defence claim that they are seeking the application of the law, and it makes sense to expose excessive interpretative efforts by the opposing side. This naturally leads to *ad personam* arguments. *La Legge è uguale per tutti* ('the law is equal for all') is inscribed and engraved in all Italian courts. In a codified system, this is not a noble aspiration but a statement of fact. The noble aspiration for which it is often mistaken is to be found in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution where it says that 'all persons are equal before the law,' which is something else entirely.



Berlusconi was back in the international, or at least the European, limelight in late 2003 when Italy held the presidency of the European Union. Misgivings about him and his government abounded; did they have the tact or democratic credentials to manage affairs with the necessary delicacy at this difficult period? But the government was

gung-ho. Italy was ready to take its place on the world stage, and the new administration was stable, efficient, dynamic. But then, in his crucial inaugural speech to the European Parliament as new President of the EU, Berlusconi suggested that the German MEP, Martin Schulz, who had raised questions about Berlusconi's judicial record, should have been a guard in a Nazi concentration camp. Deputy Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini, leader of the National Alliance, who was sitting beside Berlusconi at the time, put his head in his hands. In the silence that followed, Berlusconi continued to smile broadly, evidently pleased at his off-the-cuff quip. Only later, when he realized that he had not cut as fine a figure as he had thought, did he make sure the footage of the moment was kept off his own television stations. In a brief burst of independent broadcasting, RAI dared to transmit the excruciatingly funny moment.

Relations with Germany were further strained the following month when Italy's junior Minister for Tourism and a member of the Northern League, Stefano Stefani, told the Northern League newspaper *La Padania* that Germans were 'blonde arrogant hyper-nationalists' who, among their many other



Giacomo Balla
La Mano del Violinista
 1912
 oil on canvas
 56 x 78.3 cm
 Estorick Collection of
 Modern Italian Art,
 London

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
Rome from the Pincio
 1826–27
 oil on canvas
 18 x 29 cm
 Hugh Lane Municipal
 Gallery of Modern Art,
 Dublin



faults, ‘swill back vast quantities of beer and stuff themselves full of chips before engaging in noisy belching contests’. Chancellor Schröder announced he would not be holidaying in Italy. Berlusconi mollified him by pretending to have read and admired Nietzsche and Goethe and, perhaps more importantly, by forcing Stefani to resign. This was not so hard to do because the tourist industry, which is one of the mainstays of the Italian economy and whose interests Stefani was supposed to represent, was not happy to see thousands of cancelled bookings by offended Germans.

A Queer Victory

On 11 October 2004, the European Parliament’s Civil Liberties Committee rejected the Italian nominee, Rocco Buttiglione, as the next commissioner for Justice and Security, and thus placed the incoming European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, in a quandary. This was the first time MEPs had ever rejected a designated commissioner, and it raised interesting procedural problems. MEPs could not reject a single commissioner, but did have the power to reject the entire

Commission. As the dispute dragged on, it became clear that Buttiglione, who had described homosexuality as a sin and suggested that working mothers were bad mothers, was so disliked by MEPs, that they were willing to torpedo the entire European executive.

Buttiglione is joint leader of the centre-right Catholic party, the UDC (Unione dei Cristiani e Democratici di Centro — until recently, before Buttiglione joined it, Unione dei Democratici di Centro). Although he has been Minister for European Affairs in the Berlusconi government, Buttiglione, a bachelor-Catholic philosopher and personal friend of the Pope, was not the most obvious choice for Commissioner for Justice and Security, precisely because he is so closely associated with the Vatican (which is not a member of the EU). The comments he made were impolitic and remarkably forthright. It was almost as if he relished the idea of the controversy more than the job itself. After a show-down lasting most of October, the Berlusconi government finally backed down and proposed Franco Frattini, the Foreign Minister, in Buttiglione’s place. Gianfranco Fini, was appointed Foreign Minister in Frattini’s place.

A big fight over large issues of ethics and religion, and the first-ever hint of executive power by the European Parliament, caused a flurry of excitement precisely as Romano Prodi's depressingly dull stewardship of the Commission came to an end. Had it not been for the antics of Berlusconi and his government in Rome, Prodi's departure might have gone unnoticed. Italy has resolutely punched below its weight in Europe and yet has remained steadfastly committed to the European ideal. Prodi epitomized this workmanlike non-presence, and Berlusconi the precise opposite. When listing the achievements of his government, Berlusconi never fails to mention that his government has restored respect for Italy in Europe and abroad. Indeed, he considers foreign relations to be central to government policy, and a commitment to restore Italy to centre-stage in Europe was even one of the 'pledges' that Berlusconi 'signed' live on (his) television channel in the presence of the Italian people. He seems to be acting in the spirit of Margaret Thatcher, who also claimed to have earned 'respect' in Europe, while sacrificing Britain's status there for the sake of a closer alliance with the US. In furtherance of the newly formed foreign policy that no longer heeds the EU, Berlusconi, who is on back-slapping, arm-linking terms with President-Czar Vladimir Putin, assured the Russians in 2003 that they need not to worry about European misgivings over what are politely called 'frozen conflicts' (mass murder in Chechnya), nor about the Russian refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, nor about the problem of Moldova and Transdniester, nor, naturally, about the problems relating to the judicial proceedings involving Yukos (the second-largest Russian oil company). Russia, Berlusconi magnanimously declared, could be sure of Italian support for its attempt to form a 'Permanent Partnership Council' with the EU, without the need to address these embarrassing issues. The EU took two months to unsay diplomatically what Berlusconi had managed to squeeze into a single afternoon's chat.

To mark the start of the new Italian diplomacy, Berlusconi's new government formed a 'Ministry for Italians in the World' in 2002, and then appointed an irredentist fascist-militant, Mirko Tremaglia, to head it. Tremaglia has since been trying to bully the Slovenes, partly because he does not like them for a massacre of Italian civilians at the end of the Second World War, and partly because Italy is developing a notion of its own 'near abroad', and is increasingly open about its desire for more influence in the ex-Yugoslavia, Albania and North Africa. Commenting on Buttiglione's rejection in Europe, this Minister for Italians in the World declared: 'The queers have won.' Tremaglia, born 1926 and an active member of the neo-fascist MSI from 1946 to its dissolution in 1991, lives heterosexually with his wife, whose name is Signora Italia, no less.

By appointing a neo-fascist militant as the spokesman for Italians abroad, aligning itself with the US, trying to develop an independent (non-EU) foreign relationship with Russia, putting the blame for inflation on the euro, accusing Europe of blocking public works (notably the bridge over the Messina Straits, a project on hold since the Third Punic War), picking fights with Germans in the European Parliament, proposing Buttiglione as Commissioner and then giving pre-eminence to Italy's place in Europe and the importance of foreign policy, this Italian government is the most 'Euro-sceptic' ever — although this is not a term much used in a country whose citizens are still very pro-Europe. But something has changed. Perhaps Buttiglione's comments might not have caused such a controversy had he been appointed by a different government.

Buttiglione's rejection also ran along the Protestant-Catholic fault line in Europe, and has uncovered one of the several deep political and historical fissures into which the Americans are busily packing explosives, for the day when they will find it necessary

to blow the EU apart. Buttiglione's participation in an already right-wing European Commission would have been welcome in Washington as another small step towards driving a wedge into Europe and re-introducing religion as a counterweight to the secular and liberal underpinnings of the economic pact that led to the creation of the European Union. While it is unlikely that the Pentagon took time off from planning a war with Iran and destabilizing Asia to lament Buttiglione's exclusion, the liberals and the leftists in the European Parliament had good reasons for refusing his appointment, and it was not only — or even — because of his views on gays. If it seems far-fetched to see the hand of the American Neo-Cons in the affair, it should be noted that the mini-biography of Buttiglione on the Italian government website stresses his association with the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, the seed-bed of the Neo-Con revolution. In the debate that followed Buttiglione's rejection in Europe, the leftists and liberals who opposed him argued that Buttiglione was perfectly entitled to his own private views but did not have a right to bring them into the political sphere. Private and public views were seen as separate — and mutually hostile — spheres. The public man Buttiglione had no right to inflict his politics on the private life of gays, but the private man Buttiglione had every right to his own beliefs. In short, the private trumps the public.

This, however, is the very point that the Catholic Church wishes to make. Private virtue is greater than public virtue. Once it is accepted that private trumps public, then politics, which is discourse carried out in the public sphere, is automatically regarded as inferior to private practice, and an argument sustained in public will always lose to a belief held in private. Buttiglione demonstrated his contempt for public politics by expressing sincerely held private views. Contempt for public discourse has

always been a hallmark of the right, but now it has also learned to leverage the liberal reverence for the rights of private conscience. Corporations, too, have learned this trick, and demand the privileges of privacy even though they operate in the public sphere. The European Parliament, which engages in pure discourse without executive effect, was therefore the perfect body to reject Buttiglione, but its victory is pyrrhic. As long as politicians are allowed to stymie liberal objections by appealing to their private conscience, liberals can never win, because no debate takes place. Tony Blair justifies his actions by appealing to his own convictions. If he sincerely believes that bombing Iraq was the right thing, then who are we to criticise his convictions? George W. Bush is incapable of maintaining a public discourse, but is not expected to. Again, private belief trumps everything, and when he was forced to debate with John Kerry, he was shaking with rage at the affront to his internal conscience. Berlusconi simply refuses to participate in political debates with opponents, and regards demands by his opponents to explain his policies or justify his actions as invasions of his privacy. Unless carefully modulated, many of the arguments used against Buttiglione are arguments in favour of the superiority of private belief over public policy. Perhaps he should have been left in office after all.

A State of Embarrassment

'Let's be normal' is not a particularly inspiring battle-cry. If anything, it is abject. In a bid to secure the vote of the large constituency of Italians embarrassed by the image that the country is projecting, Massimo D'Alema, former leader of the leftist Democratici della Sinistra (DS), formerly the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) and, before that, of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), the Italian Communist Party, made 'normalization' his battle-cry. Indeed, he even wrote a book

(published by Mondadori, which is owned by Berlusconi) called *Un Paese Normale* [*A Normal Country*] in which he longingly looks forward to the day when Italy would be an ordinary decent democratic state.

D'Alema and the Centre-Left are in a constant state of disabling embarrassment that their nation should have elected Berlusconi to clown about on the world stage. But let us consider D'Alema's ideas of normality. When Berlusconi fell from office at the end of 1994 because Umberto Bossi's Northern League withdrew its support, the President of the Republic, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, a smugly hieratic Christian Democrat, sided with the Centre-Left against Berlusconi and refused to exercise his power to dissolve Parliament. Berlusconi became incandescent and demanded fresh elections, on the very persuasive grounds that those who had voted for the Northern League believed they were voting for a right-of-centre coalition, not one that was willing to support a left-of-centre government in which D'Alema's PDS was the main party. Partly in response and partly in an effort to woo Bossi and the band of truculent xenophobes he had brought into Parliament with him, D'Alema advanced the hallucinatory suggestion that the League was in reality a party of the Left.

In spite of Berlusconi's media leverage, his repeated calls for a general election were ignored, and a new Prime Minister installed. To add insult to injury, the new Prime Minister was Lamberto Dini, a former Treasury Minister in Berlusconi's government, who had opportunistically allied himself with D'Alema. In the meantime, the Centre-Left, which had been stunned by Berlusconi's victory in 1994, regrouped around Romano Prodi, a former minister in a Christian Democrat government. With his square glasses, square face, square shoulders, professorship in economics, Christian Democrat past and monotonous voice, Prodi, whose favourite

word is the very Catholic term 'serenity', emanated a sense of stability and calm, the opposite of the mercurial and still-fuming Berlusconi (whose favoured terms were 'coup' and 'communist').

The postponed general election was finally held in April 1996. The Centre-Left led by Prodi — under the banner of the 'Olive Tree Coalition' — was narrowly elected to office. D'Alema was triumphant. The result of the election retroactively legitimized the parliamentary *coup de main* of the previous year, and the replacement of Berlusconi by Prodi was hailed as the inauguration of an alternating system of government. Prodi's vision of normality consisted in getting Italy as quickly as possible into the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In other words, the best way to run the Italian economy, he felt, was to hand monetary decisions over to an unelected board of central bank governors. The almost complete acquiescence of the people serves as a reminder that Italians are historically used to foreign powers running their country, and can even see advantages in it.

To qualify for permanent loss of control over its fiscal policy and relinquish its competitively undervalued currency, Italy had to make sacrifices. Government spending was drastically curbed, workers' salaries were frozen, inflation was pressed down, unemployment rose. To reduce a national debt then around 118 per cent of GDP, the state began to sell assets. Prodi, who never belonged to the Left, had no qualms about doing this. Neither did D'Alema and his party of ex-communists, but the Rifondazione Comunista, the unrepentant communists, did. Once Prodi had secured Italian membership of the EMU, it was time for him to go. In 1998, the Rifondazione Comunista, possibly encouraged by D'Alema, refused to accept Prodi's Thatcherite budget and withdrew its support. Prodi was shunted off to Brussels, then in the throes of a corruption scandal

Alfredo Ambrosi
Loreto Madonna
c.1932
oil on canvas
99.8 x 80 cm
Museo Aeronautico Gianni
Caproni, Trento; exhibited
at the Estorick Collection
of Modern Italian Art,
London, spring 2005



as the reign of Jacques Santer came to an inglorious end. (The appointment of an Italian to stamp out corruption provoked much hilarity in the northern European press.) Back in Italy, D'Alema had himself elected Prime Minister. Having taken over government by treachery and stealth, D'Alema seemed surprised that the historical moment the Left had always dreamed of — its own prime minister in power — was such an anti-climax. (D'Alema, like so many leftists who enter government, set out to prove his non-radical credentials. He oversaw major privatization

operations and sought to cosy up to the Americans.) His big chance came in 1999 when the US asked Italy to participate in the bombing of Yugoslavia. D'Alema jumped at the chance to please. Far from feigning regret at the alleged need to bomb civilians, he was triumphant at the opportunity this afforded Italy to become 'normal'. With a candour that suggests Italy is unversed in the base deceit of international diplomacy, he declared: 'The crisis of Kosovo created new networks of relations ... the daily teleconferences [involve] five countries: the United States, Germany, Great Britain,

France and Italy. With Kosovo, we entered such a group ... [I]t is difficult to define the roles of membership in the noble circle of the great — there exists no statute.’ The phrase ‘no statute’ is telling because, in permitting bombing raids against Yugoslavia in 1999, D’Alema breached Articles 11, 78 and 87 of the Italian Constitution which specify that war may not be used to resolve international conflicts (unless Italy or one of its allies is attacked) and that military action or intervention must be debated by parliament.

An Embarrassment of Choice

Although the halcyon days of Italy’s trade unions were in the mid-sixties and they now represent mainly the interests of a greying population, they are still very strong. Italy also still has a Communist Party that attracts around one vote in ten; a powerful Catholic movement; a lively tradition of anarchist communes; a vociferous no-global movement; an extensive network of agricultural co-ops; a myriad of mini-parties that constantly deprive the larger parties of safe majorities; a politicized but still independent judiciary; independent universities; a council of state with regional tribunals; regional governments with real powers (and about to get more, thanks to Berlusconi); provincial and municipal governments with revenue-raising capacities; locally run health authorities; five regions (Sicily, Sardinia, Trento, Altro Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia) and one province (Aosta) with as much autonomy as, say, Northern Ireland; two national police forces and innumerable municipal police forces. The Italians are, of course, embarrassed by all this choice, and, in a half-hearted effort to limit it, have voted by referendum to remove the system of Proportional Representation that allows small parties to flourish. Their politicians, too, are full of praise for the British ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system. It just seems that they

cannot ever get round to introducing it; thus, electoral choice remains stubbornly rich. Owing to their willingness to buy into the Anglo-American view of themselves, many Italians still see the electoral dictatorship that exists in the UK or the non-choice in the US as preferable to their own system.

Having been persuaded by Anglo-American propaganda that stronger and more efficient government is better, Italians are now being told that Berlusconi is a threat to democracy. This must surely lead to the conclusion that it is a good thing that he does not have a Tony Blair-like majority or proper executive power after all. The failure of electoral and constitutional reform might be better interpreted as a proleptic success by a healthy democracy. The reason that Italy cannot reform its electoral system to reduce the number of political parties is that there are too many political parties to agree on reform. In any case, the smaller ones tend not to believe that their own annihilation through electoral reform is worth supporting. D’Alema tried to get the larger parties to gang up on the smaller ones by conducting talks with Berlusconi (Forza Italia) and Fini (National Alliance), but he found himself in negotiation with two political opponents and without the support of the many minnows that make up the Centre-Left coalition. D’Alema, who fancies himself as something of a strategist, was surprised when he discovered that support for institutional reform had melted away.

It seems that the Italian state is good at defending itself, and is therefore stronger than is generally believed. In other European democracies, the distinction between government and state can become blurred, nowhere more than in the UK. The government can easily change the structure of the state, which eventually shapes itself into a reflection of the government. Tony Blair had to steal Thatcher’s clothes to get elected (a cross-dressing that assured him

Robert Ballagh
Man and a Lucio Fontana
 1972
 acrylic on canvas
 213.8 x 71.4 cm
 Irish Museum of Modern
 Art, Dublin; courtesy of
 the artist



amorous advances from the Americans). In Italy, not only is this less possible, as the repeated failure of reform has shown; it is also not in the nature of Italian politicians to identify themselves with the state.

There are various reasons for the Italian government's attacks on the euro. Among them is that Romano Prodi, the person most responsible for bringing the currency to Italy, will lead the opposition coalition in the general election of 2006. Another is that the economy is in poor health, and the euro and Prodi make good scapegoats. The euro, however, is still the national currency, and so we have the curious spectacle of a government criticizing its own currency. Similarly, Berlusconi declared on 17 February 2004 that evading taxes was morally legitimate. After all, he argued, taxes in Italy are too high. Thus, in addition, we have the head of government encouraging citizens to break the laws of the state. The separation between government and state could not be clearer. This is the precise opposite of the Fascist experiment, which sought to meld the two.

When Mussolini is praised in Italy, as occasionally happens, it is for his fusion of government and state. Before the war, Mussolini seemed to have achieved that coup, but in the event, it became clear that he had not. The difficulty for any Italian government, Fascist or not, in enforcing its will is that the country has many bases of local power, whether embodied in the person of a mayor, prefect, provincial governor, trade union chief, magistrate or Mafia boss. After all, when they wanted to lever out the Fascist state from Sicily, the Americans applied for help to the Mafia. The alternative power structures, based on centuries of local tradition, proved a formidable obstacle to dictatorial rule; but another, more insidious obstacle stood in Mussolini's way. Many of those in office under him believed firmly in the Fascist state, but did not equate it automatically

with government. Not all who were willing to countenance the suppression of local power structures (notably the Mafia, which the Fascists almost destroyed) in the national interest were, on that account, always willing to accept orders from the government. They had their own idea of the state, which, thanks in part to the ideology of Fascism itself, made considerations of public governance secondary and relegated political principle to an even lower rank in the hierarchy of duty. This belief in the purity of the idea of the state is often what inspires magistrates, journalists, academics and prefects to challenge the Mafia, political parties and the government. The dirtier the politicking, the purer, by contrast, the betrayed ideal of the state.

Thus, in virtue of their shallow commitment to central government and its decrees, Italians, whether for selfish local reasons or because of their internalized belief in what the ideal state should be, did not fully participate in the industrialized murder of European Jewry. The prestige of the idea (and ideal) of the state supervened over the practice of government. This meant that Italy did not become a nation of centralized collaborators like Vichy France. At the end of the war, its people found themselves in the serendipitous position of not having to participate in the mass-slaughter of German civilians either. This reluctance to follow pernicious conviction-politics earned Italy the reputation for moral ambivalence, which it still has today. D'Alema's desire to bomb the Serbs was an attempt to shake off this embarrassing reputation by committing an unequivocally immoral act. Even if one chooses to see the bombing of Serbs as thoroughly moral, that does not relieve D'Alema's motivations of their squalor.

Italy is also reputed to be extremely inefficient, an observation that is often made with a touch of gleeful censure, as if inefficiency were condign punishment for its moral ambivalence. But the fact that the British and American legislatures can

rapidly turn out repressive legislation suggests that executive efficiency may even be inimical to the principle of liberty. What is regarded as poor efficiency in the Italian political system might better be regarded as an effective defence against usurpation. 'Usurpers,' as Rousseau observed, 'always bring about or select troublous times to get passed, under cover of the public terror, destructive laws, which the people would never adopt in cold blood. The moment chosen is one of the surest means of distinguishing the work of the legislator from that of the tyrant.' Even if Berlusconi wanted to become a political tyrant, the Italian state is proving an effective barrier. Rousseau's words have a more telling application for the US or the UK.

From Mussolini until Berlusconi, Italy has not paid homage to the gods of administrative and industrial efficiency. Since Mussolini is now equated with failure and humiliation, his lexicon of efficiency, technology, futurism, expansion and experimentation has long been unavailable to self-conscious Italians. Italians have also abandoned the idea that they might have a political truth to teach the world. Indeed, with the disappearance of the Soviet system, the US has practically copyrighted universalism.

The Rhetorical Gap

In the language of Italian politics, the 'lay' or 'secular' parties are the Liberals and the Republicans, neither of which counted for much in the post-war period. The other 'non-lay' parties were the major ones: the Christian Democrats, Socialists and Communists. These three were considered non-lay because they embodied different theological visions of the ideal republic. Although Italian Communists subscribed to the Marxian religion, they were not Soviets. Thanks to Antonio Gramsci, who introduced the notion of hegemony, compromise and adaptability have long

been available options to even the most committed Italian Communists. Gramsci liberated the Party from much of the theological absolutism that Bertrand Russell, for example, believed to be integral to Marxism and to Marxian politics. Even a diluted Marxism, however, still used language of universalistic and epochal scope. Both the Italian Communist Party and, especially, the Socialists, blended a practical and opportunistic approach to politics with the rarefied language of visionaries, and thus exposed a highly visible, and occasionally comic, gap between word and deed. The Christian Democrats were also eminently practical people, but their very name implies final allegiance to a kingdom that is not of this world. The sublunar world of politics stood in stark contrast to the crystalline zone of their theological mission. This was no great shock for a people that had produced a long succession of venal popes with highly materialist and secular ambitions.

The Socialists eventually entered government, and they, the Communists and the Catholics, managed to co-exist in local administrations. The practical and adaptive nature of these arrangements was in conflict with the visionary and theological rhetoric that the parties continued to produce. The ex-Fascists, however, were constantly excluded from power, and were therefore not compromised by it. This helped them gain the reputation as the only party that did not indulge in double-talk. The MSI also drew on the 1930s tradition of the inspirationally vague rhetoric of the Great Leader, and used it to retain the 'spiritual' high ground by pointing up the disparity between the words and deeds of their political opponents. Fini abandoned this rhetoric and, with it, this position. He is a very good political speaker, but as soon as he entered government with Berlusconi, he adulterated the purity of the MSI tradition. After that, there was no longer any point in resisting the temptations of power, and so his distancing of the party from its Fascist roots has not been that hard.

In at least one respect, Berlusconi, with his claims of good governance, efficiency and his outdated claim to be defending the country from Communism, shares a trait that Martin Amis identified in Stalin, namely 'an infinite immunity to embarrassment'. He and his party, Forza Italia (although the name of the party is derived from a rallying cry at sports events, it also has futuristic and slightly fascist undertones) have made a valiant effort to reinstate the cult of efficiency and modernity, but, as they must operate in the context of a state which they barely govern, they are constantly open to ridicule, both from the leftist opposition at home and from foreign observers, who continue to regard the country as autochthonously devoid of political competence.

The Fascists were defeated, the Communists failed, the Socialists stopped believing, but the Christian Democrats in Italy held power continuously from 1948 to 1992. Elections were *less* frequent than in other European countries. True, governments did not last very long, but changes of government amounted to no more than what other European countries would consider mid-term reshuffles. Italy did well economically, and fought off right-wing plots, the Mafia and left-wing terrorism. The public administration of Italy may have remained ossified, but ossification provided good structural stability.

The historical basis for the Italian state is nineteenth-century liberal and secular ideology; there is already an in-built conflict between respect for the institutions of state and the beliefs of the Catholics expected to uphold it. If anything, the Communists, whose ideology is an offshoot of the same Enlightenment stock as the nationalists' liberalism, had a more natural sympathy for the Italian liberal state than the Christian Democrats who eventually presided over it. Civic virtue, in the sense of belief in the dignity of the institutions of the state and the value of the community, has therefore been more prominent among Communists

and leftists than among the Christian Democrats. After almost half a century of Christian Democrat hegemony, it is hardly surprising that the practice of civic virtue was so weak. If one aspect of Italian society infuriates northern Europeans and Americans more than anything else, it is the sheer lack of civic virtue and the absence of altruism ('Look how they drive!'). Western foreigners of all political shades find themselves agreeing wholeheartedly with the Italian Left.

This version of civic virtue is a modern creation. It originated with Auguste Comte (1798–1857), father of modern Positivism and founder of the 'Religion of Humanity', a system of political belief that has had enormous influence in liberal democracies. According to Comte, the human mind develops from a theological to a metaphysical to a final positivist stage, in which humans will apply logic based on scientific observation to arrive at the truth. Naturally, the Church is hostile to Comte's belief in the superiority of human reason over faith. The idea of progress, with its various embellishments, is fundamental to both Marxism and democratic liberalism and is strongly entrenched in Italian leftist and secular opinion. Liberals and leftist Italians will often be outraged that catastrophic things (floods, child pornography, intermittent train services, administrative failure, Berlusconi) can happen 'in the twenty-first century'. Surely, they seem to be pleading, given the advances made by science, human nature should have improved by now.

Comte used the word *altrui* [others] to coin the term altruism to refer to a theory of conduct (utilitarianism) that ascribed moral value to actions the aim of which is the maximization of human happiness. These ideas, whether mediated through Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill have become part of the generally accepted notions of civic duty in a society founded on

liberal values. They are emphatically not Catholic values. According to the *Catholic Encyclopædia*, the general rules for determining the prevailing duty given by Catholic moralists are these:

- Absolutely speaking, there is no obligation to love others more than one's self.
- There is an obligation which admits of no exceptions: to love one's self more than others, whenever beneficence to others entails moral guilt.
- In certain circumstances it may be obligatory, or at least a counsel of perfection, to love others more than self. Apart from cases in which one's profession or state of life, or justice imposes duties, these circumstances are determined by comparing the relative needs of self and others.
- These needs may be spiritual or temporal; the need of the community or of the individual; the need of one in extreme, serious or ordinary want; the need of those who are near to us by natural or social ties, and of those whose claims are only union in a common humanity. The first class in each group has precedence over the second.

These rules are loose enough to stretch over the framework of a liberal state, especially where they give precedence to the community over the individual. Nevertheless, they contrast with the civic virtues imagined by the founders of the liberal state and, later, by the framers of the liberal constitution. The obligation to love self more than others, where beneficence might produce moral unease, justifies many of the practices that are associated with Italian society and especially with its Christian Democrat section: according primacy to the family to the detriment of civil society; favouring friendship over

meritocratic virtue; ignoring laws that are considered contrary to the moral teaching of the Church or, indeed, to one's own moral conscience; assessing the ethical value of laws before agreeing to be bound by them; distributing wealth with reference to local rather than national interests; countenancing a devalued currency, inflation and overstaffing of the public sector in exchange for guaranteeing jobs and, generally, comparing the 'relative needs of self and others' rather than pursuing a vain 'counsel of perfection'.

Eventually, when the distortions had become too great to bear and as soon as the Christian Democrats were no longer serving the purpose of keeping the Communists at bay, the judiciary helped to force the Catholics out of power. These were first replaced by the inheritors of Communism (D'Alema and the PDS), and later by a new coalition that explicitly recalls the values of liberalism in its name (the Forza Italia–National Alliance–Northern League coalition is called *Casa delle Libertà*, which, if transliterated, yields the comic and accurate English *House of Liberties*). The end of the Christian Democrat hegemony was supposed to lead to a reaffirmation of the civic/altruistic principles they had been suppressing. The concept of 'civil society' gained ground, and moral crusaders, bearing secular badges and claiming to represent the real state, roamed the country for several years, and only now is their talk of renewal, honesty, change and reform fading.

The Embarrassing Neighbour

Surely God was joking when He decided Italy and Switzerland should be neighbours? Each seems to define itself in terms of what the other is not. The total precision of the Swiss, their staid politics, their direct democracy, clean streets, reliable banks, their hostility to European integration, their

successful multinational companies, wealthy citizens and cast-iron constitutional arrangements all seem designed to underscore the absence of these in Italy. The joke works best if we compare Zurich to Palermo, or Naples, but a good deal less so if we compare Ticino to Brescia, or Geneva to Bolzano. Switzerland serves as a reminder that Italy, for centuries a land of city-states, could quite easily have chosen a completely different model, closer to the canton system; and it almost did, thanks to the efforts of Carlo Cattaneo.

The political structures in place in Italy just before the 1848 Revolution give an idea of how many possibilities were open. Rome, Bologna, Ferrara and Ancona were the chief cities of the Papal States, which encompassed many of the central regions of the country. They did not, however, include the region of Tuscany (a Grand Duchy allied with Austria), Modena and Parma, Lucca or San Marino, all of which had long traditions as independent and powerful Renaissance city-states, and one of which (San Marino) is still a separate republic. Piedmont and Sardinia were ruled by the House of Savoy, later to provide the kings of the unitary state. Milan, which had been frequently under French rule, was now, with the rest of Lombardy and Veneto, under the rule of the Habsburgs (Emperor Ferdinand of Austria); and everything south of Latium was in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, ruled by the Spanish Bourbons. Even after all of these were hurled together by the failure of the 1848 Revolution, followed by the improbable success of the drive to reunification, the emergence of the liberal Italian state, then a monarchy, was also fortuitous. Italy may not have been able to return to the *status quo ante*, but it might at least have been expected to acknowledge the pre-existing kingdoms and cities by introducing a Swiss-style system of cantons or instituting Cattaneo's vision of 'a united states of Italy in a united states of Europe' — an idea that still refuses to die.

Some respectable modern historians reject the whiggish idea that the national state is an inevitable outcome or some sort of culmination of events that were always pointing in one direction. Certainly, Italy made some unlikely choices but they were made in a very conscious and deliberate way, after considerable political and philosophical debate. The Italian state is, on that account, consciously constructed to a degree that other European states are not. If a state is a concept that exists more in the minds of the people than in the practice of government and enforcement of the rule of law, its collapse can occur with the suddenness of Argentines abandoning their currency, or of the nineteenth-century Irish abandoning their language. The state is a faith that needs to be reaffirmed. One of the first major public works of the new Italian state was a massive altar to the fatherland [*Altare della Patria*] in the centre of Rome. This was not just a challenge to the Catholic Church. It was part of a highly successful campaign to present the Italian state as, not merely the product of human reason, but also as a form of revealed truth. The state demands acts of worship and faith. Revolutionaries such as Garibaldi were endowed with the traits and some of the mythological power of church martyrs, and the new state set up its own secular national holidays. This ritualistic reaffirmation of the republic is visible in other Enlightenment countries. The French and the Americans, for instance, worship their flag with precisely the idolatrous awe that Protestants regard as one of the more distasteful aspects of Catholicism.

Dispassionate Italians

If we are going to accept one stereotype about Italians, it must surely be that they are not a people given to long silences. Italians greatly enjoy public debate, but often they are more concerned to find an audience than a solution. An argument

between two Italians will always contain appeals to third parties, whether present or not, invocations of sympathy from real or imaginary spectators, theatrical asides, hand movements that seek to communicate inner feelings to distant onlookers. Bitter comments are oriented to the parterre rather than directly to the other person, and this abstinence from direct eye-contact mitigates the impact of the insults.

The theatricality is real. Yet rather than remark on what is most obvious — namely that such theatrics require restraint, control of language and movement, and avoidance of physical contact and violence — foreign observers mistakenly conclude that Italians are helpless prey to their own passions. Projecting their own lack of subtlety onto a sophisticated nation, northern Europeans and Americans walk gingerly through Italian cities, convinced that serious fights are on the point of breaking out on every street corner. As the visit extends in length, the foreign visitor will begin to pick up the language and notice that many apparent disagreements were not disagreements at all, and that those that are disagreements tend to remain verbal. Rather than questioning their original assumption about passionate Italians, they start speculating on the strangeness of the Italian mind in which words do not automatically lead to deeds.

Northern European and American writers and journalists also like to communicate the utter inaccessibility of the Italian psyche by filling their pages with Italian words, as if no possible English translation could exist for them. Here is a random handful from Tim Parks (*Italian Neighbours: An Englishman in Verona* [1992]): *furgoncino* (van), *afa* (clamminess), *pasticceria* (pastry shop), *motorino* (motor scooter), *tabacchiera* (tobacconist's), *contadino* (peasant, farmhand), *imprenditore* (businessman), *residenza* (residence), and *pan di spagna* (sponge cake). Refusal to translate a simple word is taken as a sign of

authentic understanding of the culture. Far from being so impenetrably arcane, one of the defining features of the Italian language is the marked *absence* of untranslatable colloquialisms. This is especially true in the Italian that is used in public life and the media, where so much dissembling is supposed to take place. In some respects, Italian is the Esperanto of the Italic peninsula. Jokes, curses and slang, the truly untranslatable parts of the language, are expressed in dialect. Accordingly, a large part of the ‘national’ patrimony of humour is necessarily visual rather than linguistic, which may be why Italian novelists seem to be so humourless and that one of the country’s chief comic exports, Roberto Begnini, is so extravagantly physical. And far from improvising their language, Italians exercise an admirable control over it. Verbal disagreement in Italian often takes some time to descend into vulgarity and familiarity, because the essentially academic and learned nature of Italian acts as a barrier. The mimetic imperative that is so much a part of public debate forces the speakers to maintain a certain distance and control over their language, rather like actors interpreting a part. The absence of a polite form (*Lei, Voi, Sie, usted, vous*)

distinguishes English from other European languages, and suggests that English-speakers, willing to use the familiar form from the outset, are less dispassionate in their mode of communication than is usual.

The control over language is very much apparent in the fields of law and politics. Circumlocution is always to be preferred, even when framing legislation. This is not, however, a failure to engage in clear thought but, rather, a recognition that wriggle room is likely to be needed before any law or political pronouncement can be made to fit its fundamental purpose. Again, it is prejudicial to claim that this is somehow a particularly Italian trait. Rather, it is a reasoned response to a codified system of law based on the Napoleonic system. The inflexibility of the codified system, in which everything has to be entered into the statute books, needs to be tempered. It makes sense to blur the terminology a little and replace prescription with description. A lengthy preamble describing what the law is supposed to do and a slight imprecision in the normative section is a sensible way of maintaining flexibility. Italian political and legal language is therefore often concerned with the veiling of intent. The effect is

Gino Severini
Le Boulevard
 1910–11
 oil on canvas
 63.5 x 91.5 cm
 Estorick Collection of
 Modern Italian Art,
 London



further compounded by another borrowing from the ecclesiastical tradition — the notion of *magisterium*. Language that gives its meaning up too easily is not only aesthetically impoverished, but unpersuasive, because too transparent. When an Italian political entity issues a pronouncement made up of long ciceronian periods, obfuscations, mixed metaphors and apparent contradictions, it is, like the Catholic Church, more concerned with reasserting the dignity of office than communicating a message with any great urgency.

Back to Berlusconi

Rather than regarding Berlusconi as an Italian failure, we should perhaps regard him as our future. With the arrival of a joke-telling singer turned property-developer-media-tycoon-politician to power in Italy, what Noreen Hertz called ‘The Silent Takeover’ became a noisy party (*The Silent Takeover* (2001)). It is appropriate that Berlusconi should be so friendly with Vladimir Putin. The two men represent a new, or at least a revamped, form of capitalism whose configurations are only now becoming clear. Russia has been the unfortunate recipient of two experiments in western utopianism in the past century. The first was Bolshevism and the second was the post-Soviet shock therapy imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which unintentionally created an anarcho-capitalism, which is proving successful. If all goes well, Russia may develop an owner-capitalist model of business as in Italy, of which Berlusconi, Pirelli, Benetton, Agnelli and the Mafia are the best-known examples.

This economic model does not depend on the absence of government interference. Far from it. It is not the ideal ‘free market’ of American ‘theorists’ such as Francis Fukuyama. To believe that the end of Communism marked the triumph of free-

market capitalism shows a lack of logic: we can say A (free market) is not B (command economy), but not conclude that Not-B equals A. Worse still, Fukuyama and others seem to have overlooked a thousand-billion-pound gorilla standing in the middle of their theory, otherwise known as the American military. Thanks to the militarization of American society and the state of permanent war in which the US now lives, government in the US is very large indeed. Bush has already amply demonstrated that America is not ideologically committed to free trade, and, in Iraq, has shown that the US is willing to use force to gain control over basic commodities.

Italy may be the first European country to have made a coherent response to global capitalism’s erosion of the power of governments and transformation of citizens into consumers. Berlusconi has made the nexus between business and government explicit, but he did not emerge completely out of the blue. In the immediate aftermath of the political crisis that drove the Christian Democrat–Socialist government from power, the person appointed Prime Minister in 1992 was Giuliano Amato, Craxi’s chief adviser. Amato’s main qualification was his technical competence. A professor of constitutional law with a good grounding in economics, he was regarded as an ideal candidate to steer Italy through the change. Although appointed by Craxi, he managed to put himself across as a non-political crisis management expert, which he was. He was followed in 1993 by a complete technocrat, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, who at the moment of his appointment was Governor of the Bank of Italy. He, in turn, was followed briefly by Berlusconi, but then another technocrat, Lamberto Dini, also from the Bank of Italy, took over the reins of government (1994–96). It is worth noting that neither Ciampi (later to become President) nor Dini had been elected to Parliament, yet they were both appointed Prime Minister. Romano Prodi (1996–99) too, was



essentially a technocratic figure. And Prodi went on to serve as President of the technocratic and fundamentally undemocratic European Commission from 1999 to 2004.

After this string of technocrats — interrupted briefly by D'Alema, whom the voters never chose — Berlusconi can be said to have restored some proper democratic accountability, as well as some colour, to the office of Prime Minister. The important point to note, however, is that Italy chose legal and economic technocrats in place of politicians, and then chose Berlusconi, a businessman. If Prodi or Berlusconi wins in 2006 and hangs on in office until 2011, Italy will not have had a politician's politician in power for an entire generation, apart from a few months of D'Alema.

It has been some time since the social democratic parties in Europe displayed any real policy differences from their Centre-Right opponents, or since the Democrats in the US differed greatly from the Republicans. This has also been true in Italy, and perhaps the Italian Socialists were among the first to toe the capitalist line completely. Now, however, Berlusconi has shifted the Italian Centre-Right to a new position that is hard to pinpoint. At a moment when many European citizens feel helplessly lost in a political world in which Left and Right no longer provide meaningful direction, the Italians are drawing up a new map. ■