Dr. Bertolaso, How Could you Do this to Us?

Judith Harris (February 12, 2010)

He was once considered the "man of reconstruction" in earthquake-devastated L'Aquila. Now he is accused to have received sexual favors in return for awarding lucrative building contracts

ROME – Here's Premier Silvio Berlusconi's latest quip about his involvement in last summer's titillating scandal involving very young wannabe starlets and, at his home at Palazzo Grazioli, paid "escorts": "You wouldn't want me to be [Piero] Marrazzo, would you?" Marrazzo is the man who, after admitting involvement in affairs with transvestites, resigned his elective post as the Partito Democratico [2] governor of the Lazio Region around Rome. Get it? It's morally all right to have affairs with juveniles (as his wife has alleged) and with prostitutes, as long as they are female.

What is true is that not even Berlusconi's most enthusiastic supporter would put him on a pedestal as a model for boys and girls. And the only reason I belabor this point is that we now have another

sleaze scandal, which involves the one man who has been hoisted upon that pedestal, but risks slipping off and, with him, our own confidence in whither Italy.

Guido Bertolaso was about to be made a cabinet minister, thanks to his challenging work in handling first the Naples garbage tsunami and then the Abruzzi earthquake. Nothing so difficult can be called a complete success, but in both cases he demonstrated sufficient style, acumen and dedication that he, at least, became a national hero, someone every Italian can look up to. And this remained true despite his overly cavalier and self-praising words about the Haiti disaster relief, when he managed to offend the U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton by calling the U.S.-led relief effort "pathetic."

The foreign press have been among the many who have had a crush on Bertolaso, as was evident when he was given star treatment at a press conference I attended at the Associazione della Stampa Estera [3]. And the same was true in the Abruzzo, where we foreign journalists toured the quake relief zone with him at L'Aquila, together with the city's mayor, who is from the Partito Democratico, but did not hide his admiration for the director of the Civil Protection [4]. By profession a medical doctor, Bertolaso came to be called the "guardian angel" of the Abruzzo. The Alto Adige Region, which contributed enormously to the Abruzzo relief operation by sending prefab houses, was resentful of its help being largely overlooked. But inevitably Bertolaso's successes became the star in the crown of Berlusconi's government, for they showed the kind of can-do pragmatism, just get the job done attitude that Berlusconi has made a watchword of his administration. Bertolaso's halo has reflected its light upon Berlusconi, whose successes have otherwise failed to create much after-flow.

This past week Florentine inquiring magistrates put Bertolaso on a list of those under investigation for crony contracts. The same investigation has put Angelo Balducci, who is President of the High Council on Public Works [5], behind bars. The most serious allegation is of kickbacks of various kinds for construction projects in Northern Sardinia, launched for the G8 summit, which was held instead, upon a last-minute decision of Berlusconi, at quake-stricken L'Aquila, present President Barak Obama. Italian newspaper allegations, citing the Florentine inquiry, allege that Bertolaso received both "money in cash and sexual favors" in exchange for meting out contracts to friends.

Bertolaso denies the charges and says that all will be clear. He also submitted his resignation, which was refused by Berlusconi. Bertolaso says furthermore that the allegations, based on wire taps, that he received sexual favors at a luxury Roman sports-cum-night club, vaunting a "wellness center" and disco dancing, were incorrect because they were literally "massages" necessary to help him relax from his difficult job. The words in the leaked phone taps are to a degree ambiguous—"I've just arrived from the U.S. and if this afternoon Francesca could..I'd be happy if…a quick overhaul" [una ripassata].

This reporter (and everyone else I know) would love to believe that a ripassata is just that—I've long had a private campaign to make Bertolaso premier—but then it is also alleged that the favors, massages or whatever he received were gifts from a major contractor with a sleazy reputation who had taken benefit from the fat contracts dished out, in haste and without competition, by the Civil Protection agency. More damaging still, a company belonging to an engineer who happens to be Bertolaso's wife's brother was allegedly among those beneficiaries, and this may be the toughest charge for Bertolaso to deny.

It may be that this sorry tale shows that even the best have difficulty in fighting the system. As the old saying goes, Chi lotta con la merda, sia che vince, sia che perde, finisce sporco. He who fights with shit, whether he loses or wins, winds up dirty.

Disclosure: I have a personal, deep vested interest in the Civil Protection agency. In 1980, when little

Alfredo Rampi fell down a well outside Rome and all rescue efforts died, his mother, Franca Rampi, and a group of the volunteers who had worked on the Naples earthquake of a few months previous got together to create a lobbying group seeking creation of a Civil Protection agency, which did not at that time exist. To its credit, the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro gave the group a room and a phone line. I was asked to handle press relations for Signora Rampi, and in this way I became a member of he lobbying group. Every weekday afternoon for one year we worked as volunteers, doing all we could in memory of the needlessly dead two-year-old boy and the Neapolitan quake victims to promote the creation of the agency. The lobbying worked, and I still think of Bertolaso's agency as partly mine.

Dr. Bertolaso, how could you do this to us? Et tu?

Update: Bertolaso Friday acknowledged that he may have overlooked some problem areas in the assigning of the contracts contested by magistrates, which do not involve civil protection, but special events construction, projects such as a swimming pool center in Rome for international competition and the celebrations of the unification of Italy.

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