

Letters from Italy After Berlusconi: Politics Behind the Scenes

Judith Harris (December 17, 2011)



"The man who governs Italy has no power. At most he can ask a courtesy, but he can't give orders. [Mussolini] was right when he said that it's not difficult to govern the Italians, but it is useless."
(Silvio Berlusconi)

ROME - The irrepressible **Daniela Santanchè**, 40, whose idea of foreign diplomacy was to denounce the prophet Muhammad as a polygamist and pedophile, ranks high in the Berlusconi fan club firmament. In an interview with Fabrizio d'Esposito in the daily *Il Fatto Quotidiano* this week, she trumpeted that people can now stop "spitting" on the former Premier's Liberty Party (PdL) because the Monti crowd are in trouble. Had the racist murder of two black immigrants from Senegal happened in the previous government, she said, "you'd have blamed Berlusconi, blamed the League,



blamed Santanchè. Where's the scapegoat enemy now?"

Santanchè is a member of Parliament who served as Berlusconi's Undersecretary to the Minister of Platform Accomplishment (don't expect me to explain what that is). Like Bossi, she gives the finger to those she dislikes. But the suspicion is that she just may be aiming high: "I firmly believe that only a woman can take Berlusconi's place. Even in the Quirinal Palace a woman would have made the difference." As for the new premier, "The markets and the spread don't give a f*** for Monti's maneuver."

So what is Berlusconi doing these days with his new leisure time? "He's very visible, I don't need a torch to find him. He comes to party meetings, is determined and serene, and working hard so as not to waste eighteen years of political activity. It won't be long before the Italians are begging for him and yelling, 'Give us back the stinker' [spoken literally in dialectal Roman, Aridatece er puzzone]. With us, the TV talk shows were lovely and lively, but now they've lost their audience."

It is true that Berlusconi is keeping busy. He had an inconclusive day in a Milan court. He is actively tending to his soccer team. He appeared in Parliament to vote confidence in the Monti government, as promised. He pronounced Monti "a desperate man" and "the lesser [of which?] evil." Elsewhere he said flatly, "I don't have to beg anybody's pardon for having underestimated the crisis. We'd seen it clearly." This, of course, contradicts his earlier notorious statement that there is no crisis in Italy, where the restaurants are full and the airlines have long waiting lists.

And—don't laugh—Berlusconi also turned up the other day for the presentation of a book called "This Love" (Questo Amore), written by his TV talk show promo buddy **Bruno Vespa**. Vespa's love book publisher Mondadori (which conveniently belongs to Berlusconi) promises that in it the author "investigates a multi-faceted universal sentiment: adolescent love, the love of the thirty-somethings, of the fifty year olders and the people in their sixties [read: the Viagra years] and even more—ordinary people, actresses of today and yesterday....mother love, gay love, love of God....he offers a fresh portrait of the Italian soul." (See Vespa himself at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moqVG9uo8Pw> [2])

Phew. At the launch in Rome, Vespa tried to coax his old friend into speaking about love, which is, after all, the theme of the book and one of the names under consideration for Berlusconi's future new political party, as Il partito dell'amore (the love party). "It's not the time to speak of that," Berlusconi snapped, his chin jutting with mixed anger and determination. The love boat sank further when "the stinker" declared that **Italy is "ungovernable—or better, impossible to govern....** These days I've been reading **Mussolini's** diary and the letters from [his lover Claretta] Petacci. I see myself in those letters. The man who governs Italy has no power. At most he can ask a courtesy, but he can't give orders. [Mussolini] was right when he said that it's not difficult to govern the Italians, but it is useless." Claretta Petacci died with Mussolini and her body was hanged with his upside down in a Milan square.

Two recent diaries involving Mussolini have appeared in recent years. One was the diary, considered by most historians to be a fraud, published in 2007 by Berlusconi's beleaguered political ally **Marcello dell'Utri**, a member of Parliament risking prison for alleged Mafia ties (see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mussolini_diaries [3]). That probably forged book amounted to a rehabilitation of Mussolini and claimed that he had considered the racial laws of 1938 an aberration. The second—the one to which Berlusconi referred, is composed of Claretta's letters, published as *Mussolini segreto* (Secret Mussolini) in 2009—shows a decidedly racist Duce.

Vespa failed to ask the obvious question: why are you reading this book just now? What is this about? Instead Vespa asked, coyly, "How many Claretta's have you had?" This amazing question may have been intended to perk up the audience and the obviously grouchy Berlusconi by harking back to the good old bygone bunga bunga days. "Hundreds," the Premier responded cheekily. If there was a point, it was that Claretta's love—the subject of the Vespa book is love in all its forms, after all—for the Duce was sincere, as is the love accorded Berlusconi himself by the faithful political females like Daniela Santanchè.

Friday evening's vote of confidence, which confirmed the emergency fiscal and money-saving



measures of the government of Premier **Mario Monti**, Monti snapped back, saying, “I am not a desperate man.” Showing just how little love was lost between Berlusconi and Monti, he went on to announce that he is incorporating in the money-saving package an important clause: that instead of reallocating digital frequencies to the main existing TV operators for free, there would be an auction—an enormous money earner for the government, and an enormous kick in the teeth for Berlusconi’s Mediaset, which owns three largest of the independent networks.

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