

On Referendum Weekend, Santoro Steals the Show

Judith Harris (June 12, 2011)



Despite the importance of the questions under debate, a shouting match on RAI TV's Channel 2, seen by 8.5 million viewers, overshadowed even the referendum vote. During the political talk show Annozero, a Minister of the sitting Government accused the popular anchorman Michele Santoro and his journalists to be a bunch of leftists who shouldn't work for national public television... "I am sick of paying for [these people's] wages," said Hon. Roberto Castelli. A feud ensued...

ROME - Who'd have thought it? On the eve of an abrogative referendum vote Sunday and Monday, June 12 and 13, a TV shouting match has stolen the show. This upstaging is all the more surprising because the issues at stake are of crucial importance to all citizens because four controversial laws



on three issues would be overturned: a return to construction of nuclear power plants, the privatization of waterworks so they can turn a profit for businessmen, and the dodgem Law No. 51 of April 7, 2010, providing immunity while in office to politicians of rank, if not of limpid lives.

Put another way, the referenda concern the personal safety of Italians and their neighboring countries for generations to come, as well as the choice of where to place investment money—whether in nuclear power plants or in research into alternate energy resources. They concern household and government finances, and whether business should make profits from what the rich and the poor pay equally (two separate queries regard water privatization, so there are four queries on three issues). And they concern placing limits upon the behavior of politicians, including as concerns corruption, beginning with Premier Silvio Berlusconi himself.

Abrogation means voting yes in each case, but not everyone gets the point, and I personally spent an evening explaining to a bright young Italian construction worker that to vote “yes” means to say “no” to construction of nuclear power plants, to paying private companies for the water flowing into your home, and to letting crooked politicians off the hook. The referendum vote for abrogation is being staunchly supported by Roman Catholic laymen and clergy in Italy. At the same time the vote also has the backing of the center-left, at a time when the center-right Premier Berlusconi’s personal popularity has declined notably—just how far no one knows, but few here doubt that the yes vote will prevail.

However,—and here’s the rub—50% of the nation’s eligible voters must turn out for the referendum vote to be valid. Despite ardent campaigning, by such an unlikely coalition as nuns carrying placards and students jumping into fountains, such a large turnout is almost too much to expect on days when schools have just been let out for the summer holidays, and only two weeks after the hotly contested vote for local administrations. That lack of a quorum is the only way to protect his pro-nuclear, pro-privatization, pro-dodgem laws was tacitly admitted by Premier Silvio Berlusconi, who publicly declared, “I personally won’t go to vote, it’s a waste of time,” and by his partner in government, Umberto Bossi, head of the Northern League, who also announced he would not vote. Their preference is a 10-year moratorium on the nuclear debate so that, as pro-nuclear government spokesmen have explained, the “emotional” reaction to Fukushima can dissipate.

But is it only an “emotional” reaction? At the annual conference held last weekend in Venice of the influential Council for the United States and Italy, whose president is Fiat-Chrysler chief Sergio Marchionne, members heard experts debate for and against construction of nuclear power plants. The debate turned lopsided when the expert promoting construction acknowledged that, “We tell our clients, ‘you are building for a century, and not only for your own country.’” The expert advising against pointed out that the Japanese scientists entirely overlooked the fact that the area where the tsunami destroyed the power plant was well known to suffer three tsunamis per century. He also specified that the U.S. has not yet found a way to dispose of nuclear waste, still “temporarily” deposited in sites near the plants.

Italy built its first nuclear reactor at Ispra near Milan (Varese) in 1959, and then, more ambitiously, a power plant in Latina due South of Rome in 1963. Two others followed, and by 1970 over 3% of the country’s electricity came from nuclear power. In 1975 the government projected construction of another 20. But the problem remained that much of the country lies on a seismic fault, one reason why a referendum vote, held in 1987 in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, blocked construction of new nuclear power facilities.

Despite the importance of the questions under debate, the shouting match on RAI TV’s Channel 2 on June 9, seen by 8.5 million viewers, has overshadowed even the referendum vote. For literally years Premier Berlusconi has been savagely and noisily battling the anchorman of the political talk show Annozero, the popular Michele Santoro, and has been trying to unseat him and others who do not fit the government mold. This was to be the season’s last show, and, as usual, a pro-government spokesman was invited to participate, in this case the former Justice Minister (2001-2006) Roberto Castelli, 65, a Bossi faithful who is today Berlusconi’s Undersecretary for Infrastructure.

To synthesize, Roberto Castelli said, “Don’t make me pay the annual RAI subscription, I pay the RAI subscription and am not interested in, I am for privatization of the RAI, I don’t want to pay the



subscription any more... we are sick of paying for it, they're all leftists at the RAI, take a look at the marketplace.... I am sick of paying for [leftist journalist Marco] Travaglio, I don't want to pay his wages. If you're so clever, go onto the open market...."

Shouting over him, Santoro replied that he was sick and tired of such talk: that his program brought in the advertising that paid for the politicians. In the end Santoro said that he would be willing to work for the following season for exactly one euro (\$1.45) per weekly broadcast, the RAI administration willing. (Italian speakers can see and hear their quarrel at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuoQRHOX3wM> [2].) Over a thousand comments poured into the site immediately, mostly on the lines of: "Is Castelli brain damaged? He repeats again and again, 'I pay the subscription,' like a dope (okay, the writer actually said "coglione"). And the hundreds of thousands of euros Castelli earns comes from people like me." Wrote another, giving his name: "Send them all home, let's us govern this country, with different ideas, we can discuss them and come to some agreement."

As for Santoro's future, at the moment it is as mysterious as the turnout for the referendum. Stay tuned.

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