

Rubbish and More Rubbish

Judith Harris (June 19, 2009)



In a country in dismay, the Church asks Mr Berlusconi "to clear the air." Italian bishops urge the Premier to respond not only to political adversaries, but also to "that part of public opinion which is not prejudicially adverse" to him.



ROME - "Rubbish," is how Premier Silvio Berlusconi yesterday described the ever more poisonous news reports in a scandal now in its fifth week. "I got rid of the rubbish crisis in Naples, and I can get rid of this."

But not just yet. The larger fact is that the "rubbish" has begun to cling, to the point that the growing malaise in the broader public cannot be ignored, even by those who favor a center-right government. As the editorial writer of the business daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* opined today, "The sense of dismay [smarrimento, translated in Dante as 'lost in a dark forest'] about the private affairs of the Premier is becoming palpable, and the wall built around him by his friends and defenders is getting ever higher."

This morning for the first time the Conference of Italian bishops, the CEI, weighed in with an editorial in their daily newspaper *Avvenire*, in which Mr. Berlusconi is urged to "respond to public opinion," over allegations that paid female escorts have attended the Premier's parties. "As soon as possible there should be sufficient clarification to clear the air of the most pressing questions, which are being raised not only by political adversaries, but also from that part of public opinion which is not prejudicially adverse to the Premier," said the editorialist. The current media storm at home and abroad has left the public at large "feeling lost," the Catholic daily continued, asking rhetorically whether Mr. Berlusconi has so far defended himself as best as possible, and if he has had the best possible people defending him.

The sense behind the wording is clear: Mr. Berlusconi has failed to offer a convincing defense, perhaps, to be charitable, because he has been ill advised.

Neither the teenager Noemi and the birthday party business, nor Mr. Berlusconi's irate estranged wife's public complaints touched off a similar reaction. What made the Catholic Church in Italy enter this unsavory fray are new judicial investigations, which risk seriously tarnishing Mr. Berlusconi's personal reputation.

Magistrates in Bari have launched two separate inquiries into allegations of possible corruption attempts by a rich 35-year-old businessman, Giampaolo Tarantini, who dealt in hospital supplies and party girls, some of whom were hired and air-shipped to the Italian Premier's personal residences in Rome and Sardinia. Put another way, the hypothesis is that political party favors were swapped for party girls. The inquiry has so far led to a half dozen paid female escorts, the most important of whom is former calendar girl, Patrizia D'Addario. As *Corriere della Sera* revealed Tuesday, D'Addario told the investigating magistrate in Bari that businessman Tarantini promised her E 2,000 for spending the night at the Premier's residence in Piazza Grazioli, hard by Palazzo Venezia in Rome, but that she quit the party to stay instead at a hotel, and so was paid only E 1,000. (Reportedly her being denied a certain building permit further put her pretty nose out of joint.)

For so far unknown reasons D'Addario wore a concealed tape recorder to that Palazzo Grazioli party. The two taped bobbins she turned over to the investigators have not been transcribed so as to avoid their contents being leaked and are locked in a safe of the Guardia di Finanza.

Some observers here argue that all participants at the Premier's party are potentially vulnerable, for if one paid party girl can tape the goings-on at a party, so can others, with blackmail a potential risk.

In the background the Premier faces a number of important events. First is next week's G8



meeting, to be held at quake-stricken L'Aquila, where the world leaders will be hunkered down in Carabinieri barracks and the press kept at a tidy remove a two-hour drive away on the Adriatic coast. Then there is a forthcoming nationwide referendum which, if successful (most unlikely), could curb the Premier's power.

Farther distant in time, and far more important for Italy and its allies, is the future of political Italy itself: the risk of a collapse of the government and the calling of new elections barely a year after the one which gave Mr. Berlusconi a full vote of confidence; the ongoing tug-of-war over possible alterations of the postwar and anti-Fascist Constitution; and Berlusconi's ambition to succeed to Giorgio Napolitano in 2013, when the octegenarian President's seven-year term ends.

In the wings is Berlusconi's on-again off-again party comrade in the Partito della Libertà Gianfranco Fini, the president of the Chamber of Deputies, who did not fail to make a cutting remark or two about this latest scandal, to which an angry Berlusconi did not fail to respond.

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