

Where's the Joke? Not in the Senate, Alas

Judith Harris (June 13, 2010)



The "Privacy Law" wanted by Silvio Berlusconi passed in the Senate in a vote of confidence on Thursday. In Italy's "darkest moments" for press freedom, as the National Federation of the Italian Press defined it, can writer Stefano Benni's telephone jokes make us laugh?

[Stefano Benni](#) [2], the author of the beloved short story collection *Bar Sport* (1997), is one of the funniest men alive. But not even Benni can make us laugh about the government-proposed gag law that was passed in the Senate in a vote of confidence on Thursday. The bill now passes to the Chamber of Deputies, where an even more bitter battle is expected.

While the vote was being counted, the opposition senators on the losing side staged a walk-out, and the following day the nation's best-selling daily [La Repubblica](#) [3], went onto news stands with a blank front page to show what it means to be muzzled. The beleaguered author of *Gomorra*



[Roberto Saviano](#) [4], who is Italy's Salman Rushdie, wrote that the aim of the law is "not to defend the privacy of the citizen, but on the contrary it's a law to defend the privacy of power itself—understood not as the privacy of powerful men, but of their business interests, including crooked."

When and if it becomes law, the bill will seriously clip the wings of magistrates and journalists investigating financial and other crimes. As many believe, it will whittle away at democracy itself, in a country whose democratic system of government dates only from 1947 and was won only in war.

Before the law takes effect, that rare beast here, the opposition media (rare because Premier Silvio Berlusconi owns or controls the vast majority of the media, from movie and shelter magazines to film companies and TV networks), is offering readers a flood of details which in future can be published only at risk of giant fines and jail sentences for both journalist and publisher. The [National Federation of the Italian Press](#) [5] spoke direly of this as one of Italy's "darkest moments" for press freedom.

And an authoritative American figure, Vincent Cannistraro, CIA veteran officer and former director of intelligence programs for the National Security Council from 1984 to 1987, in a telephone interview with *La Repubblica* said that his understanding is that the new law would attempt to make "the tool of wire taps completely residual—it would discourage them. But if so I fear that the costs your country is preparing to pay in terms of security will be very high indeed....Such a disciplining of wire taps as you are discussing in Italy would be unthinkable in the US." (my retranslation from Italian, fyi).

So what's there to laugh about? Very little, but Benni tried. His conceit was that at an outdoor market he picked up a box of ratty old tapes. Taking them home, he played them (again, my translation from Benni's fertile imaginings) and heard things like this:

"Pronto, Napolitano here. Am I speaking with the Premier?"

"This is the voicemail of Silvio Berlusconi, Emperor of Italy. If you wish to leave a message of congratulations, press one. If you wish to obtain a personalized law written just for you, press two. If you want to bring charges, call the number 89999999965432222 to leave a message with an operator who speaks Swahili. If you wish a gorgeous chick, press four. If you want to abolish the Constitution, press five. If you are a Commie, press the trigger and shoot yourself. If you are Bondi [Culture Minister Sandro Bondi, author of affectionate verses to Berlusconi], stop calling me your little cupcake. If you are Napolitano [President Giorgio Napolitano], press nine and leave a message after the beep."

"I am Napolitano. What I wanted to say is...."

"The three seconds at your disposal are over. You may call again next month."

One of the left leaders predicted that the coming battle in the Chamber will be like the Vietnam war. Most eyes are turned to Gianfranco Fini, in hopes that the President of the Chamber of Deputies can somehow soften the blow. But the problem is that Fini, if he presses too hard, will bow to Berlusconi's not very veiled threats to take the country to the polls. It's a sort of political blackmail, for the problem is, what if elections were held and Berlusconi were to win? What then?

Not even Benni can offer us a laugh at that prospect.



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