

Arsenic and Old Pols

Judith Harris (January 13, 2013)



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ROME - Because we live due north of Rome atop rocky volcanic soil , the water piped into our homes is heavily laced with arsenic. For safety the town fathers have installed a low-cost water purifier, which means that of a morning a dozen people stand in line to fill their bottles (eight for just eighty cents). As the water gushes into bottles, the neighbors disgorge their political views. For the past



three days they have focused upon an evening talk show that went on for 2-1/2 hours on the left-leaning, independent (presumably) national TV network La Sette. This long, long show featured just three persons: that master emcee of political debate Michele Santoro, the former Premier Silvio Berlusconi (for whom Santoro had once worked) and the lively intellectual Marco Travaglio, second-in-command at the leftist daily Il Fatto Quotidiano.

With open support from the Catholic Church here, acting Premier Mario Monti, an economist and president of the prestigious Bocconi University in Milan, is now running on his own moderate ticket, for national general elections to take place in just six weeks. During this week's poisonous TV duel a' trois, Berlusconi called Monti's emergency government a product of the "envious, inhuman and criminal Communist left." This ignores the fact that, for eleven of the thirteen months Monti was Berlusconi's successor as head of the present emergency government, Berlusconi's Freedom Party (PdL) voted in Parliament again and again in favor of Monti. It was Berlusconi's withdrawal of support that brought down the Monti government in December. At the polls Feb. 24-25 Monti will be a keen rival to Berlusconi for centrist votes.

Berlusconi tossed out plenty of other poisoned darts. Here are a few:

- Under my government, "I am not accepting any responsibility for what this government has done.... The travel agencies were busy, the restaurants were working at full speed, and it was tough to book an airplane for a weekend getaway." The crisis, in short, came after he left as head of government just 13 months ago.
- Under his government - which lasted 17 years altogether - unemployment stood at 8% (today, over 10%). "The profs [Monti and several of his cabinet members are university teachers] got swollen heads after a bit and paid no attention to our observations. Let's be clear: they brought the country to this sorry pass."
- "Monti was kept in power by the left, who brought with them the dirt and envy toward those who have more, those who with sacrifices managed to buy themselves a home. With the left comes the envy of the Communist ideology, inhuman and criminal, which has always remained just the same."
- "Santoro, you're getting paid to be here, but I'm here for free. But I need to make money, I have to pay the woman who was my wife no less than 200 million lire [error: he meant euros] a year." For this he has to thank three Communist feminist judges who took the part of his ex-wife, he added.

Marco Travaglio's role was to attack Berlusconi. He reminded Berlusconi of the bunga-bunga parties, of his three ongoing court cases (one involving alleged sex with a minor), of putting a purported former girlfriend on the public payroll, and on and on, concluding by saying: "Berlusconi, you wasted 20 years. You used your energy and power, not to combat the Mafia and tax dodgers, but to combat those who fought against them.... What's most important today is not what you said and did in those two decades, but what you did not say or do."

Fighting back, Berlusconi attacked Travaglio in what can only be described as an underhanded manner. A bigoted part of the Italian press alleges that Travaglio is gay, and so, when Berlusconi unexpectedly claimed the chair in which Travaglio had been seated, the former Premier ostentatiously wiped the chair seat clean with a big white kerchief. It was a pantomime by a consummate actor, and no one missed the point. But on the off-chance someone did miss it, Berlusconi also said pointedly, "Hey guys, don't let yourselves get screwed." Get it? The Italians did, and many were pleased with Berlusconi's dumping on presumed homosexuals.

Although one-third of Italians watched the show, it can hardly be described as Italy at its best. Down at the water pump today the villagers were still expressing outrage. "Santoro knew that Berlusconi would use him to make a comeback." "Santoro is sleaze - he never attacked Berlusconi!" "Santoro and La Sette cared more about getting a big audience share than about giving Berlusconi a platform that would relaunch him." Indeed, the pollsters acknowledge that the performance has relaunches Berlusconi to some degree, just when he appeared most feeble. Berlusconi himself considers his appearance a terrific success, and is already supposedly asking which of his collaborators will come join him at the Quirinal Palace when he is elected president of Italy to succeed Giorgio Napolitano in mid-2013.

If this seems audaciously ambitious, a realistic problem is control of the Senate. Italy's election law, insultingly dubbed the "Porcellum" (hog law), gives the regions a greater margin of control than has



Parliament. The upper house has 315 elective seats plus five for lifetime senatorial appointments. The winning coalition automatically receives 55% of Senate slots. Berlusconi's new election pact with Roberto Maroni of the Northern League just may tilt the Senate to the right in opposition to the 630-seat Chamber of Deputies, which is expected to be controlled by a coalition of leftists and moderates with Church support.

Hold onto your hats. To paraphrase the poet, "The best is yet to be."

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