

Monica Lewinsky or Noemi Letizia? Flings and Politics in Italy

Judith Harris (May 19, 2009)



Many look at Letizia Noemi as an Italian version of Monica Lewinsky. But while Clinton's popularity fell dramatically after his extramarital affair, Berlusconi's has sagged by a mere 3% as a result of his divorce. Thus, although Catholic, Italians seem to be very tolerant... But is religion the only issue involved?

Le Divorce—you know whose—is the only game in town, but what is it all about? Versions differ. Some sniff and say, “It is private business, and no one else’s.” Others, like a clergyman of some rank, brush it off with, “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” Some of the many admirers of Premier Berlusconi nod tolerantly, saying, “You know he’s exuberant, a live wire.” Berlusconi himself puts the fuss down to “envy” and those who would make political hay of his family affairs, which is to



say of his extra-familiar affairs. But none of this suffices, and the ante is being raised.

For those who have managed to dodge the question, the Premier unexpectedly showed up at a party given for Noemi Letizia, a lissome lass in Naples, on the day she passed from seventeen to eighteen. Referring to the Premier as "Papi" (Daddy), Noemi boasted that he gave her a gift of a diamond-studded gold necklace, valued at around \$7,500, according to press reports; photos of the necklace can be seen on Internet sites.

Odd, said the Premier's now estranged wife, since he never bothered to attend his own children's birthday parties. In an open letter published in the Italian press, and presumably checked first by her lawyer, Ms. Veronica Lario Berlusconi also used two particularly serious fighting words: "minors" in the plural and "health," as in concern for the Premier. This letter was the opening sally for proceedings to begin le Divorce.

A few days later a seasoned former magistrate, Giuseppe D'Avanzo, published in La Repubblica daily a list of ten questions he thinks we journalists should ask Mr. Berlusconi. Already under siege by what his brother Paolo's daily Il Giornale calls the Communist press, Mr. Berlusconi had explained that he attended the fateful birthday party as a friend of the girl's father, a former chauffeur to the late Socialist Premier Bettino Craxi. When this role was disproven, the father was then described to the public as an habitu  of the Craxi circle in Rome. This role too dissolved. So D'Avanzo's legalistic mind excogitated the questions to be put to the Premier.

Of these, two appear particularly important:

--"Veronica Lario said that you 'frequent minors.' Are there other [minors] whom you meet with and are raising?" (he has raised me, the girl told an Italian journalist).

--"Your wife said that you are not well [non sta bene] and need help. What is your health condition?"

Were I in D'Avanzo's shoes this reporter would have added, "especially since you have, on several public occasions, briefly lost consciousness."

D'Avanzo's list is being published in the newspaper daily, but it hardly matters: no one is answering the questions. However, the affair remains of particular interest because witnesses (the photographer and his assistant, who took slightly sexy photos of the 15-year-old girl, in the presence of her mother, for an album to submit for showgirl TV slot), have confirmed Noemi's account of enjoying a special relationship with the Premier. Asked what she foresees for her future, Noemi ingenuously told the Neapolitan journalist that she would like to be, with Berlusconi's help, either a showgirl or a Member of Parliament.

Whatever.

The London Times offered another intriguing notion—that the real connection may be more subtle, dating back years, and was between the girl's mother, a failed showgirl, and the Premier. Such a connection for now is unproven, but meanwhile Richard Owen, the Times correspondent, has been pilloried by Il Giornale, ostensibly over a possible mistranslation in his account. With the personalized attacks on the respectable Owen the rightist press is now attacking all foreign correspondents. The reason includes but goes beyond the present case, for what the Italian press frequently hesitates to publish, the more outspoken foreign press does--and then the Italian media pick up the report, which keeps them off the hook. Hence the salvos against the foreign press in toto this week.

For the moment most ordinary Italians, by which I mean the non-newspaper readers, are still brushing all of this off as media run amok—just as they are still brushing off the gravity of the financial crisis. They see Ms. Lario Berlusconi as just one more desperate housewife.

Aside from a certain entertainment value for audiences, however, a number of serious issues are involved. The first is to what extent it matters to the Italian voting public, which includes Catholic faithful and their clergymen, if indeed minors were involved, as Ms. Berlusconi has said publicly, and if her husband, as Premier, is dodging the truth in the same way President Clinton dodged the truth about his relations with Monica Lewinsky. Does the Italian voter care, or is Italy today so lulled by a controlled pacifier called TV that it scarcely takes notice? So it would appear, for in this Catholic country the Premier's popularity has sagged by a mere 3% as a result of what elsewhere would be considered a grave and alarming scandal.



Secondly, as an economist interviewed by RAI TG3 pointed out, Italy, like the U.S., has awarded its top managers giant salaries even as the purchasing power of the Italian middle and working classes is far below what it was in the Seventies. The top one percent is richer than ever, but everyone else is de facto poorer because of this widened gap.

The tolerance therefore of little Noemi's showgirl aspirations, pinned on a recommendation from the Power of Powers, would in this view reflect a generalized sense of helplessness, exemplified by a massive turn-out in Turin this week by hopefuls seeking a slot in a reality show, the only way to get ahead. The reality show has become reality, and the Noemi "dream" (to use the words of her father) is as much a sign of the times as is the public debt, now 120% of GNP.

The third issue is how free of political control is the Italian press. Outside observers of press freedoms have recently downgraded Italy, for the first time described as having a semi-free press. Although some journalists have shown notable independence in reporting this affair, the extent of subservience still remains to be seen, in what is a tough test. Elsewhere journalists would be digging hard to get at the bottom of this story, and some here have, but very few.

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