

The Attack on Berlusconi and the Vicious Climate of Italy's Political Discourse

Judith Harris (December 16, 2009)



The action of an isolated, disturbed youth would seem to reflect the harsh language and vicious climate that has become the hallmark of discourse between government and opposition. Meanwhile Berlusconi aides blame the Internet, the magistrates, and the opposition.

ROME— Following Sunday's brutal attack by a disturbed youth armed with a powdered marble souvenir of the Milan cathedral, Silvio **Berlusconi's** personal doctor reports that the premier is resting and in good spirits. Although his public commitments will be on hold for two weeks, he is expected to leave the San Raffaele hospital Wednesday.



The entire hospital has been transformed into a bower of get-well floral offerings. "It looks like a garden in here," marveled a nurse. The overflow is being sent to other hospitals. As for Berlusconi himself, according to Don Luigi **Verzè**, the priest who founded the San Raffaele, "He loves everyone, including his enemies."

Meanwhile his room in the San Raffaele hospital has become a Mecca for politicians of almost every stripe. Among the political pilgrims, there presumably to eat his words, was Pier Luigi **Bersani**, the new leader of the opposition party Partito Democratico (PD). Shortly before Berlusconi was injured, Bersani had told a crowd that the Premier is a populist "millionaire who plays the pipes, and all the poor fools (i poveracci) fall in behind him," as the virulently pro-Berlusconi *Il Giornale* reminded its readers

The rest of Italy is drowning in a veritable tsunami of comments. Everybody who is anybody, and also everybody who is nobody, has an opinion to offer. At the Café Magnolia at Campo de' Fiori this morning, body builder Francesco said knowingly, "That **Tartaglia** may be crazy, but someone put him up to it. It was a plot." (Intelligence chiefs here deny this firmly.) On the other hand, during a radio phone-in a father complained at the lack of help in the country for all mentally disturbed, who include one of his own family members: "The maximum hospitalization is only three days, and the subsidy for food, housing and clothing is only E. 220 a month," he said.

A deeply disturbing note: hundreds of Internet petition signatures praising the gesture, and launching cries from politicians for more controls over the Internet. **Twitter** has launched a vogue for pithy phrases, and so one Twitterer offered this nasty comment: "Twenty years a nut case, one minute of lucidity." By the same token comments from the pro-Berlusconi side can similarly tend to the heinous, like this one, using the word "red" to mean Communist: "Gnaw, gnaw, Komrade, and your teeth will be consumed sooner or later in the red faeces of the sewer from which you will not escape."

One hotly debated question was whether or not Berlusconi's wife **Veronica**, currently suing for divorce, had spoken personally with her estranged husband or not. The consensus: she phoned the hospital for an update on his condition.

For twenty-four hours most serious political commentators hesitated to cast blame. But several serious themes are emerging. The first asks to what extent the vitriolic debate of the past six months has fostered a climate of violence. Even if this was the action of an isolated, disturbed youth, it would seem to reflect the harsh language and vicious climate that has become the hallmark of discourse between government and opposition, with each side blaming the other. Does the blood on Berlusconi's face signal that Italy is in for a revival of Seventies-style Years of Lead, as many here have been predicting in recent months?

A second theme is the Machiavellian calculation that Berlusconi will take genuine benefit from the outpouring of sympathy. Until Sunday's incident he was definitely in political difficulty. But a political cartoon in *Il Manifesto* Tuesday said it all by showing a hand graciously offering a miniature cathedral as if a gift on a platter. Already, demands are being made for Berlusconi's political program to be enacted, down to and including a revision of the Italian Constitution and a whittling away at the powers of the **judiciary**, which Berlusconi claims is left-leaning and overly politicized. The magistrates have created this atmosphere, Don Verzè charged in an interview in Tuesday's *Corriere della Sera*. "This is the real reason why it is necessary to change the Constitution. The judiciary's manhunt has created the context in which this aggression became possible. The magistrates have to be redirected back to their proper role, which is to be above and beyond politics."



The current, very important trials involving the Mafia and the Camorra bosses have been put onto a back burner. In one of these a Berlusconi former top aide, Marcello **Dell'Utri**, is on trial for the third time following two convictions for Mafia association.

A third consideration is future protection of all heads of state everywhere. Berlusconi has always enjoyed what is called here a "bagno di folla," or working the crowd. But now the risk, intelligence officers say, is for copycat crimes, perhaps with people throwing cell phones. Indeed, throwing the Duomo at Berlusconi was not far from being an imitation of the shoe thrown at former President George W. **Bush** during a press conference.

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