

The better Italy beneath Silvio's putrid surface

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Bimbos, belly dancers, bunga-bunga. Italy has had its orgiasts since the time of Nero, but none has been such a figure of disrepute as Silvio Berlusconi has become. For journalists, it's a turkey shoot. The mocking articles write themselves and every sententious moralist feels a need to jump in. By the time Germaine Greer had her say, I found myself — almost — feeling sorry for Berlusconi.

I have no idea whether Berlusconi has done even half the things of which he is accused, though I notice that one of the showgirls in his harem said that all he was good for after dinner was *nana* (a nap). That's the end of her hopes for a political career.

The tragedy is that the man who once seemed to embody the best hope of delivering Italy from the banana-republic reputation it had acquired in the 1970s and 1980s is now dragging it even deeper into that mire. And it's happening at a time when Italy can least afford such a reputation. Many of its traditional industries, in particular textiles and shoes, have been hollowed out by Chinese and other Asian competition. Its ability to compete in world markets has been eroded by excessive trade union demands. It is being flooded with immigrants and asylum seekers from north Africa as a result of the turmoil there. The best of its young people are increasingly looking abroad for their careers so as not to be tarred with the image of a comic opera country in decline. There is a desperate need for strong and principled leadership.

However, Italy seems unable to generate an alternative to Berlusconi. It almost defies belief that no credible new leader has

emerged to take advantage of the tottering pharaoh. The left is divided and discards its leaders more rapidly than Berlusconi's bunga-bunga girls are said to discard their knickers. On the right, the federalist Northern League is

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constrained within its regional power base.

It also frightens many

Italians with the prospect of an autonomous republic of Padania, which would divide Italy just as it celebrates the 150th anniversary of its unification. The small parties of the centre revive memories of the endless procession of short-lived coalition governments that characterised earlier decades.

Italy's tragedy is to be caught between three authoritarian ideologies: fascism, communism and — although morally very different — Catholicism. All three discourage independent thought and stifle change. As a result, anyone creative, original and enterprising has no interest in joining the arthritic political, civil-service and judicial institutions but lives a life as distanced from them as possible. Where they have to interact with the system, they do so by constantly seeking ways to outwit it. Cocking a snook at authority is a national pastime.

That was the secret of Berlusconi's original appeal to Italians. Here was a man who seemingly had the ability to get away with almost anything and come out unscathed. If he could play the system so successfully, surely he would be the best person to change it. His promise when he entered politics, to create a modern liberal state that would unleash Italy's creative and business talents and restore the momentum of the economy, was just what Italy needed.

We were duped. His real agenda turned out to be very different: to exploit all the vices of the old system to protect himself and his business interests. In the process, he has devalued and discredited Italy's institutions still further.

Despite the pessimism, I am not one of the increasing number who profess themselves ashamed to be Italian. I know there is a different and better Italy below the putrid surface. There is the backbone of family-owned companies that is the great strength of Italy's economy — the same size as Britain's, let's not forget, and stronger in manufacturing and creativity. There is a level of voluntarism, born of the inability of the state to provide services, that makes the British "big society" look insubstantial by comparison. Family values are far less eroded than they are in Britain. They are easy to mock — how can you tell Jesus Christ was Italian? He lived at home until he was 30, thought his mother was a virgin and she thought he was God — but they are the bedrock of our lives, more than for other European societies.

Perhaps Berlusconi will continue to outwit the system, defy the courts and stay in power for a year or two yet, though I find that hard to believe. Or perhaps Italy will go the way of north Africa with massive popular demonstrations finally forcing him out. There would be irresistible *schadenfreude* in seeing Berlusconi and his friend Colonel Muammar Gaddafi exit together. The worst outcome would be fresh elections that just perpetuated the rule of existing political parties with no ideas or vision other than to hang on to their privileges and pensions.

Italy must find a leader who understands the need for dramatic change in our politics and institutions to make them fit for purpose. In a time when other European nations have turned up younger and charismatic leaders such as Tony Blair and David Cameron in Britain and Nicolas Sarkozy in France to lead change in their countries, it will be a final humiliation if Italy, home to some of the greatest leaders and statesmen in world history, fails to rise to the challenge.

Charles Clover is away. This article first appeared in The Tablet