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# Is there a Garibaldi for today?

This week Italy marks 150 years as a modern unified country, but the land that has been central to more than two millennia of European history now faces becoming the laughing stock of the continent and urgently needs a new leader to restore its fortunes



**B**imbos, belly dancers, bunga bunga. Italy's history has had its orgiasts from Nero onwards. 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.

I have no idea whether Prime Minister Berlusconi has done even half the things of which he is accused. The tragedy is that the man who once seemed to embody the best hope of delivering Italy from the banana-republic reputation that it had acquired in the 1970s and 1980s as a society lubricated by favours and bribes, and subverted by Masonic lodges and criminal organisations, is now dragging it even deeper into that self-same mire.

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, finally challenged by Fiat, whose managers threatened to close a major factory and decamp with the company to Detroit.

While immigrants and asylum seekers from North Africa arrive as a result of the turmoil in their homelands, the best of Italy's young people are increasingly looking abroad for work 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.

But 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 discard their clothes. On the Right the federalist Northern League is constrained within its regional power base in Lombardy and Venice-Friuli. It 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 jostle for public attention but only revive memories of the endless procession of short-lived, multi-party coalition governments that characterised earlier decades.

Italy's tragedy is that the nation's creative, original and enterprising minds have no interest in joining the arthritic political, civil-service and judicial institutions but live lives as distanced from them as possible, almost as exiles in their own country. 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 work the system so well, 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. The promises were not kept and 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. One only has to witness the ambivalence of the Vatican towards him to see that. Bunga bunga may horrify the church hierarchy, but for them Berlusconi still represents the best bulwark against the goddess Left.

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, which is the great strength of Italy's economy, the same size as Britain's and stronger in manufacturing and creativity.

There is a level of voluntarism, born of the inability of the state to provide services, which

makes the British Conservatives' Big Society look insubstantial by comparison. A strong sense of individualism acts as a barrier against an over-mighty state. Family values are far less eroded than they are in Britain. If you want proof of how much they are the bedrock of our lives, consider in which other country the biggest circulation magazine would be called *Famiglia Cristiana*.

I don't know how it will turn out. 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 Berlusconi out: nearly 500,000 women turned out to demand his resignation recently. The worst outcome would be fresh elections, which just perpetuate 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. We don't need another Mussolini for sure: the trains run very nicely on time with one of the best high-speed networks in Europe. And after the experience of bringing in Berlusconi from business, Italians will be cautious about repeating the experiment of an outsider, though there are women and men of stature in the business and financial world who could do a better job than any of the present party leaders.

In a time when other European countries 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.

■ Lady Powell is a Rome-based writer.