

The forthcoming European Parliament elections are supposed to be another symbol of how much we Europeans increasingly have in common. But are we really drawing closer and absorbing more of each other's national characteristics and practices in a gigantic European melting-pot? From the vantage point of someone who is Italian by birth and British by citizenship – a privilege for which I was charged ten shillings (or 0.8 euros) in 1964 and have found extraordinarily good value – the convergence would be welcome.

The British maintain a condescending affection for Italians, expressed in jokes about Italian tanks in the second world war with one forward gear and three reverse gears. I remember Lady Thatcher introducing me at Downing Street receptions by saying, "She is Italian, you know" – as if that was sufficient explanation for any aberrant behaviour.

But there's quite a lot more to being Italian than hand-waving eccentricity. Italy has more or less caught up with Britain in per capita GNP and by some statistics overtaken it (*il sorpasso*). An Italian, Romano Prodi, is taking over as president of the European Commission while the British scramble for the Euro-job crumbs. Another Italian, Sonia Gandhi, may soon be running the world's largest democracy.

Above all, though, from the top to the heel of the boot, Italians have turned life into lifestyle – a perfect combination of work and play, man and woman, simplicity and refinement. This carefully paced *dolce vita* is the envy of every other nation. But they're in luck: the newest best-seller in Italy is entitled *Italiani Si Diventa* – you become Italian. If this is so, then there's hope for the British. Instead of adopting the Italian-style proportional voting system, with its inevitable result – a weak coalition government – Britain can copy Italy in plenty of other areas.

Take the family, for instance. There are many jokes about Italian mammas. Question: how can you tell that Jesus Christ must have been Italian? Answer: because he lived at home until he was 30, thought his mother was a virgin and she thought he was God. But the fact is that the family, the foundation stone of Italian society, protects and helps its members. Networking, for jobs and marriage prospects, is done through cousins, nephews and in-laws.

# Brits should be more like Italians

There are many lessons to be learnt from the creators of the *dolce vita*, writes **Carla Powell**

another because they know that behind each individual stands a posse of relatives ready to revenge their honour. Families do not break up with the same ease as they do in Britain: not only is the divorce rate significantly lower in Italy, but grown children usually stay at home until they are married (and even, at times, after); and the elderly are not deported to old folks' homes but remain a key part of the family unit. Everyone benefits from this: the mamma in need of a free babysitter and the granny in need of some company.

On the question of gender relations, Britons would also do well to copy Italians. In the office, Italians openly acknowledge that a bit of flirting and a subtle recognition of mutual attraction lubricates working

tensions and turns toil into fun. Instead of screeching "sexual harassment", women (and men) take a colleague's attentions for what they are – a compliment.

Equally important to the Italian way of life is the emphasis they place on leisure. Unlike the British, who have the shortest holidays in the EU, Italians are fierce in their defence of free time – in August, the nation comes to a standstill as holiday-makers flock to the beaches or the mountains; Christmas holidays stretch well past 6 January, the Feast of the Epiphany.

Italians spend more money on holidays than the citizens of any other country. And even during a regular working day, no self-respecting Italian will do without an espresso at 11 which breaks the office routine and allows him or her to gossip, meet up with a friend or just watch the passers-by. Putting a premium on leisure means we stroll and don't run, and we savour everyday moments in a way that would be totally alien to the British: cooking becomes an art-form rather than a utilitarian task; dressing is a carefully studied ritual that aims to make an impact rather than to cover up; and even popping down to buy a newspaper is turned into a chance to moan about the neighbourhood going to the dogs or boast about your son's exam results.

Another Italian lesson for Britain is the small and medium-sized family-owned company. This domestic enterprise flourishes – despite inefficient government, overbearing trade unions, heavy taxes and social burdens – because the blood-ties ensure honesty and caution during boom periods, as well as greater resilience during hard times.

Italians also genuinely appreciate romance – which makes us very different from the English. I remember on our honeymoon, having drunk too much, drawing my husband's attention to a beautiful full moon. After peering at it intently for a while, he announced with great satisfaction that it was a lamp-post. That summarises the gulf between Italian sentimentality and British pragmatism.

Italians work hard, play hard, enjoy sex instead of feeling furtive about it, and display our bodies with gusto. Maybe we Italians are sometimes naive optimists. But better that than the peevish and grouchy moods that afflict the British. If Britain could share Italy's ability to live life with zest and joy this country would be a much happier place.

## BILL GREENWELL

### Goodbye, Dolly

*Dolly the cloned sheep is prematurely ageing. The average age of theatregoers was said to be 58*

Dolly's no longer in clover  
Dolly is short in the tooth  
The age of her innocence? Over  
Gone is the first fleece of youth

Dolly was frolicking last year  
Full of new projects and cud  
Now Dolly's out in the pasture  
Up to her udder in crud

Her principles look very woolly  
Priorities seem pretty strange  
If she were beef she'd be bully  
It looks like a slight touch of mange

Dolly can't claim when disabled  
Nor read up the files of Bo Peep  
Dolly was formerly fabled  
Now she goes to the theatre to sleep