

Carla Powell The Diary

Berlusconi resurgent, Catholic loyalties and the deviant Dachshund



I spent Christmas in my ancestral village in the Italian Alps for the first time in many years. I went to school more than 60 years ago with the electrician, the plumber, the carpenter and the mayor and they all treat me as though I have never been away. It's amazing how easily one can slip back into one's early life, and reassuring, too. We had a carol service and Nativity play in the neighbouring church, which my family originally built in the 17th century and my great-grandfather restored over a century ago. There are memorials to villagers who wandered off even further than I did, including one who became Archbishop of Patagonia. Afterwards we gathered round fires in the churchyard to eat stinchetti – a cross between pancakes and a large crisp – and drink hot wine with the local male voice choir. I got legless, following in my grandmother's footsteps: pre-Second World War she was the valley's midwife, the only medical practitioner of any sort, and notorious for celebrating each successful birth by getting smashed with the father of the newborn baby. If there were twins my father had to be despatched with his motorcycle and sidecar to bring her home.

Slick Silvio's back

Those who know Italy primarily as an opera-loving, happy-go-lucky country will find it hard to credit that a main topic of conversation these days is the "spread", the difference between the interest we pay on our national debt and what Germany does. It precedes even the football scores on national television, reflecting the dire state of our economy, where the market cap of all the quoted companies on the Milan exchange is less than that of Apple. The admirable Mario Monti has helped restore national dignity after Berlusconi's buffoonery, but his reforms are only the first instalment of what needs to be done. Italians face a stark choice in February's parliamentary elections. Do they vote to continue with Monti's reform agenda? Or listen to siren voices that promise an easier way out of our difficulties? Berlusconi is promising to relax austerity and get rid of unpopular

measures such as the property tax. The left has no track record of labour-market reforms, which are indispensable to resolving the crisis. And it remains to be seen whether Monti can make the transition from being an appointed prime minister heading a cabinet of unelected experts to leading a coalition of squabbling politicians. Italy deserves better than its existing political class – but in that case, why does it go on voting for them?

Entente alcoolique

I remember when Italy and Britain saw themselves as natural allies against Franco-German dominance of the EU. The alliance was cemented in Margaret Thatcher's time by full-dress summits involving not only her and the Italian prime minister, but a panoply of cabinet ministers. Once, when a professional interpreter failed to turn up, I was summoned to interpret at a summit lunch in No 10. I arrived breathless to find the chosen subject was civil nuclear power. "You can't discuss that," I wailed. "I don't know the words in either language." A happy time was spent discussing the merits of Italian wines instead, much to the benefit of Anglo-Italian relations.

Sadly the alliance no longer exists. There is blank incomprehension in Italy about the UK's perceived intention to leave the EU, and acute discomfort that Italy will be left

with no alternative but to become an acolyte of the Germans and the French.

Yah boo to horrid Henry

Christmas always reminds me how special the links between Catholics in Britain are, mostly because centuries of persecution and discrimination made it necessary to depend on each other's discretion for protection. For some, Catholics will always be a potentially subversive secret society with foreign loyalties, up there with the Masons and even the KGB. However, now that the last traces of discrimination are being removed, not before time, with the change in the law to allow the heir to the throne to marry a Catholic, it will be interesting to see whether the special bonds between Catholics will survive. I hope so, because they add a dimension to personal relationships which the relaxed commitments of Anglicanism do not provide. Eat your heart out, Henry VIII!

A love that dare not woof its name

We were back at our smallholding in the Roman countryside for New Year, which was also my 70th birthday. My husband has had the task of feeding our eccentric assortment of animals. He moans that it's all very well for Heston Blumenthal, but how about Michelin stars for those who have to serve up an infinite variety of oats, corn, grass and pellets? But the big crisis was the failure of my champion Dachshund to mate with his chosen bride and produce puppies for the grandchildren in the spring. When I told my husband to help, he asked: what was he supposed to do, draw a diagram? Imagine my shock when I caught the Dachshund bonking the cat. Surely that is on the index of prohibited relationships.

The irony of Maggie

One sadness at Christmas was Lady Thatcher having to spend it in hospital. But the Iron Lady's will is as strong as ever and, helped by her sainted carers, she is now recovering well. The hospital, on the other hand, is probably still under sedation. ●

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GRIZELDA
TO COME

Caption in here please