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ANCIENT AND MODERN

Putting the rich to work



It seems most odd to become so agitated about the (very few) filthy rich when the (large numbers) of very poor should be the centre of the welfare state's concerns. But if one wants to fleece the rich, a *quid pro quo* always helps, as the ancient Greeks knew.

Every year in Athens, the richest 300 citizens could be instructed to carry out a *leitourgia*, lit. 'work for the people', i.e. a personal obligation in service of the state (origin of our 'liturgy'). The wealth in property that qualified a man for such a duty was 3-4 talents (18-24,000 drachmas). This duty could involve anything from equipping a trireme for a year to underwriting dramatic productions. These did not come cheap. A working man's wage was 1 dr. a day. One of the cheapest liturgies was staging a choral show at 300 dr.; putting on a stage production could cost 3,000 dr.; and running a trireme for a year 5,000 dr. and more.

The rich, however, are a hard-headed lot, and Athenians were no different. What if old X down the road had more money than Y, but Y was landed with the *leitourgia*? Y could choose to challenge X to an *antidosis*, an exchange of property. If X agreed, Y would carry it out; if not, X would carry it out (if, that is, he lost the court-case he would bring, disputing Y's claim).

But there was a competing, even more powerful, emotion involved: desire for public acclaim, with all the kudos and political benefit that brought. Greek literature is full of examples of the rich citing the number of *leitourgiai* they had carried out, and at what expense, to demonstrate the fine service they had done for the community.

If the adult male citizen population was 60,000, the top 300 would account for one 1 in 200. Today's taxpayers number 30 million. The top 300 would equal 1 in 100,000 — about right for the really stinking rich? And what endless hilarity the *antidoseis* (pl.) would provide! But, as an ancient orator said, 'The greatest *leitourgia* that one can perform for the city is to live, day by day, a life of orderly self-restraint'. Or fund *Classics for All...*

— Peter Jones

The young pretender

Can Florence's youthful mayor save Italy from herself?

CARLA POWELL



If ever a country's politics needed a shot in the arm, it is Italy's. As the economy wobbles on the brink of catastrophe, we Italians are desperate for a new face from outside the discredited political caste: an Italian Obama, if you like. But who could possibly step into the breach? Some eyes are turning towards Florence's handsome young mayor Matteo Renzi, who at 36 makes David Cameron and even George Osborne look like grizzled veterans.

To go from running the world's most beautiful city to leading the world's most ungovernable country would be a huge, and daunting, step. In Italy politicians are supposed to form an orderly queue and wait their turn for the top jobs. The only new faces in Italian politics in the past decade have been a few TV weathergirls, promoted by Berlusconi. Nevertheless, in these perilous and nerve-wracking times, Renzi has been rapidly ascending the greasy pole. He recently announced that he is not interested in leading his party, the left-wing Democrazia Proletaria, a disavowal which, as anyone familiar with Italian politics knows, should be taken with a pinch of powerful salt. At a birthday party for a cardinal last week, I spoke to two well-informed Jesuits — if you want to know what's really happening in Rome, consult the Society of Jesus — and they were convinced that Renzi will run.

Who is he then? Let's start by saying that he is far from a stereotypical Europe-

an socialist; indeed he seems to have been inspired by the ideas which Tony Blair used to create New Labour. Blair returns the compliment by describing Renzi as one of the smartest young politicians he has met. Beppe Severgnini, author of the excellent book *Mamma Mia: Berlusconi's Italy Explained for Posterity and Friends Abroad*, described Renzi to me more ambivalently as 'smart and bold, but also a narcissistic Florentine who likes to impress, shock and annoy'.

Renzi's first goal as mayor of Florence is to run an effective administration which delivers efficient services. He has called for an end to state financing of political parties; he aims to slash the grossly inflated number of publicly funded university professorships; he hopes to remove the medieval restrictions on competition in the middle-class professions, and he is prepared to tackle pension reform. Such aims may sound pedestrian, but in Italy they are almost revolutionary.

His enemies claim that, while Renzi's good ideas are not very new, his new ideas are not very good. True, he has a tendency to hop on politically correct bandwagons: the green economy, votes for 16-year-olds, a single-chamber Italian parliament. No one, however, doubts his ambition. He was quite prepared to jump the queue and run for election as mayor of Florence, despite the fact that his party leaders had told him to wait a few years.

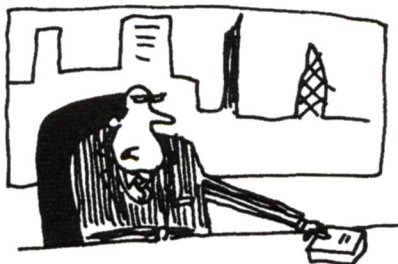
Moreover he has charisma and good

looks, which make him an appealing television performer. Don't knock it: it worked for the young Tony Blair. To draw another comparison, he is what another mayor wishes he was: the thinking woman's political crumpet. Eat your heart out, Boris!

Yet, as an outsider seeking to leapfrog from provincial affairs to Italian national politics, Renzi faces an enormous challenge. He does not have the advantages of Berlusconi, who could use his enormous wealth to create his own party and to persuade the electorate that he would bring successful business practices into government.

Now, though, no one in Italy has any confidence that a version of Berlusconi's coalition can introduce the spending cuts and structural reforms which the EU is demanding as the price of shoring up Italy's sagging economy. No one believes the leadership of the left can do it either.

Berlusconi's failure could be Renzi's opportunity. Italians are braced for austerity, odd though that sounds. They know that sacrifices are required, and are looking for someone capable of implementing and enforcing the necessary economies in a way which is fair and does not shelter powerful interest groups from pain. The stakes are high. While a Greek default would do only limited damage to the rest of Europe, if Italy



ACEO

Snizelda

'Miss Jones, bring me my scruples.'

sinks in its sea of debt, it will pull the whole eurozone down with it.

Salvation will not be achieved by waving a magic wand and whisking Signor Renzi from Florence to Rome. There has to be a process. Virtually the only institution which retains credibility, apart from the Bank of Italy, is the country's presidency, which commands great prestige notwithstanding its lack of real power. Italians are looking to President Napolitano, a sober and cerebral ex-communist and the complete antithesis of Berlusconi, to move into the leadership vacuum and appoint a non-political government

of experts to devise a recovery programme. That is the essential step, which the politicians have shown themselves incapable of taking.

Once a coherent programme is in place, there would have to be early elections to confer democratic legitimacy. That would be the moment to remove the sclerotic political leadership in Rome and to introduce Renzi as the new face of Italian politics, capable of commanding confidence not merely at home, but more widely in Europe and among international banks and financial institutions.

This would be asking a lot of Renzi, to be sure. Already he is being savaged by the political establishment, including his own party, as infantile, just a pretty face, a fount of facile policy proposals, an ambitious whelp. Suspicions are being voiced about a secret meeting he held with Berlusconi at the latter's notorious Arcore villa. Certainly there are many politicians all too aware that their careers would be wiped out by the forceful tide of a new political generation.

In the end, Renzi may prove to be just another meteorite flashing through Italy's political atmosphere before disappearing into the void. But I'm betting otherwise. Unexpected changes bring unexpected leaders. Or as the British say: 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man.'

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Tourman's Greco-Roman theatre with Mt Etna beyond, steel engraving c. 1840 (detail)



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