

THE SPECTATOR

STOP TONY BECOMING PRESIDENT OF EUROPE

Rod Liddle says that Europe is united in the campaign to prevent Blair getting the new top job

LORNA FITZSIMONS REVEALS ISRAEL'S PLAN TO INVADE GAZA



MARTIN VANDER WEYER: NORTHERN ROCK WILL BE SOLD OFF ON eBAY
 VENETIA THOMPSON: OBAMA IS AN OTHELLO FOR OUR TIMES
 TOBY YOUNG: I'M APPALLED THAT RAMBO HAS TURNED INTO A LIBERAL
 ALEX JAMES SAYS THAT FIDDLYWINKS IS THE TRUE GAME OF KINGS

THE SPECTATOR
 180
 ANNIVERSARY

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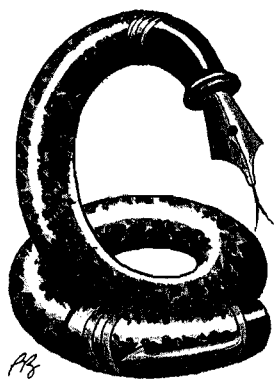
DIARY

CARLA POWELL

I am a late convert to the internet, but it has changed my life. I can sit here in my little farm in the Roman countryside and cultivate my olives — or, to be truthful, watch Dario the farm manager cultivate my olives — while keeping up with the world's press, receiving photos of my newest granddaughter in Hong Kong and bombarding my friends with misspelled emails. Who needs the hassle of the big city, congestion charging, airport security or a social life? I can live my rural idyll while still feeling a part of what's happening in the world beyond — enough anyway to sign off my emails 'Carla (not Bruni)'.

Italy is heading towards elections in April. The state of the country is pretty dire, not unlike pre-Margaret Thatcher Britain. But for once people feel some hope for the future. The *mani pulite* (clean hands) purge more than a decade ago was supposed to have dry-cleaned corruption. Actually, all that happened was that the parties changed their names to Air-Wick-fresh titles like 'olive tree', 'rose in the fist', 'wake up Italy' and many more, while behaving much as before. But now the realisation has dawned that Italy is being left behind by the rest of Europe and that we can no longer afford the self-indulgence of a multiparty system in which every small interest group can hold the whole government to ransom. The elections will for the first time offer a choice between two clear-cut and unusually united groups, former Rome Mayor Veltroni's democrats on the left and Berlusconi's People of Liberty on the right. There is not the same sense of novelty and excitement generated by Sarko in France or Obama in America: Italians are too cynical about their politics for that. But for once I feel optimistic that things will finally change for the better.

The Catholic Church here is giving a strong moral lead — unlike their Anglican brethren. Indeed it is credited with a hand in bringing down the Prodi government by speaking out against its permissive attitude on issues like same-sex marriage. Maybe the best course would be to let the Cardinals run Italy for a while! Man for man — and there is no other way with Cardinals — they are wiser, more talented and strong-minded than our politicians. A new Lateran Treaty, perhaps, in which the Italian state sub-contracts running the country to the Vatican? But then I wouldn't want to raise the hopes of Archbishop 'Sharia' Williams for something similar in Britain.



Perhaps my new-found optimism about Italy springs from visiting Northern Ireland last week and sensing the new mood there. I had an unrivalled guide in Father Eugene of St Brigid's church in Belfast and stayed with Professor Moloney of Queen's University and his amazing sister Maria, an international businesswoman with three doctorates. I fear I may not be asked back after hailing Professor Moloney outside

the law courts with, 'Darling, your bed was so comfortable last night!' I've never seen so many sniggering barristers. My last visit had been in the Nineties and the change since then is overwhelming. It's not just the physical differences, the explosion of elegant new office buildings and shopping centres among Belfast's still beautiful and eclectic Victoriana, but the sense of optimism and confidence, the open faces returning smiles instead of suspicious glares. There is an uplifting sense that the people are determined to put the past behind them and make peace work. The most unlikely but hopeful change of all is the sight of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness working together in government. It was a reminder of the early days in South Africa when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and chose reconciliation over revenge.

Above all Northern Ireland today is far removed from the pervasive security fears of the Eighties with the roadblocks, fortified police stations and army patrols. Even that sometimes had its brighter side. Because my husband was working for Margaret Thatcher at the time, we were deemed to be at some risk from IRA terrorism. The thoughtful authorities issued us with a long stick with a mirror on the end, so that we could look under the car for bombs. It was of limited use, since I would not have recognised anything in the jumble of wires and trailing debris under our ancient vehicle unless it said 'bomb' in capital letters. But I did eventually find a use for the mirror on a stick, by taking it to the Caledonian Ball in Inverness to check out the stories about what Scotsmen do or do not wear under their kilts. Actually it wasn't much use there either, because the mirror soon steamed up.

My brother-in-law Jonathan, who was closely involved in the Northern Ireland peace negotiations as Tony Blair's chief of staff, is about to publish a book about them. Those who have seen the draft say that it is a first-class read even after Whitehall and the libel lawyers have had a go at it. Not a self-glorifying diary but a straight piece of history. I am sad to say not everyone has shared in Northern Ireland's new spirit of reconciliation. When I told my husband that I had met Martin McGuinness in Belfast, he grumbled that 'that lot' had nearly killed him when they mortared No. 10 Downing Street in 1991. Strangely, he was not mollified when I said there were days when I felt like doing that too. No sense of humour, these Englishmen!

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