

Berlusconi Explained to Posterity and Friends Abroad

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Translated by Giles Watson ©

Explaining Silvio Berlusconi to the Italians is a waste of time. Everyone has a take, honed by years of indulgence or aversion, and impervious to change. Every Italian has the one true interpretation. Discussion is superfluous.

It will be more to the point if we profile Silvio Berlusconi for posterity, and for non-Italians while we're about it. Posterity isn't here yet, but it will want to know what was going on. Non-Italians just don't get it, but would like to. After all, something like this could happen to them.

How is it that Silvio Berlusconi - Mr B. for short - got elected (1994), topped the polls again (2001), was voted back in (2008) and could well clinch the next election? What's the secret of his political longevity? Why have a majority of Italians supported, and/or put up with, him for so many years? Can't they see his appetites, his limits, his methods? Obviously, they can. If Mr B. has dominated Italian public life for almost two decades, there is a reason. Actually, there are ten of them.

1 THE HUMAN FACTOR

What do most Italians think? "He looks like us. He's one of us." And the ones who don't are afraid he might be. Mr B. adores his kids, talks about his mamma, knows his football, makes money, loves new homes, hates rules, tells jokes, swears a bit, adores women, likes to party and is convivial to a fault. He has a long memory and a knack for tactical amnesia. He's come a long way, alternating motorways and back roads. He's unconventional, but knows the importance of conforming. He extols the Church in the morning, the family in the afternoon, and brings girlfriends home in the evening.

Mr B. is great entertainment value so he gets away with plenty. Many Italians ignore his conflicts of interest (haven't we all got 'em?), his legal issues (a defendant is easier to like than a judge) and his inappropriate remarks (he's so spontaneous!).

What about the broken promises, the half truths, the blurring of public and private interests? Some people get hot under the collar, others turn a blind eye. Apparently, there are more of the latter than the former.

2 THE DIVINE FACTOR

Mr B. knows that many Italians speak well of the Church because it makes them feel less guilty about not going to mass, or systematically ignoring seven of the ten commandments. We don't expect our leaders to walk the walk when they talk the talk. Private indignation at public contradictions drives voting in many democracies, but not in Italy. Silvio knows he's dealing with a country that eschews expectation to avoid disappointment. The Vatican, if not Italy's parishes, is content with Catholicism-friendly legislation, and doesn't worry about the example being set. Catholic movements like Comunione e Liberazione like to focus on ends - which are in the future, uncertain and subject to opinion - rather than the means their friends employ.

This eschatological mode is music to Mr B.'s ears, shifting attention from actions to intentions.

3 THE ROBINSON FACTOR

Every Italian feels he or she stands alone against the world, or if not the world, the neighbours. Survival - personal, family, social and economic - is a source of pride and a test of ingenuity. Much has been written about Italians' individualism, our resourcefulness, its limits and its consequences. That was Mr B.'s starting point. First he amassed his fortune, earning his spurs as a self-made man. Next, he built on Italians' distrust of everything shared, our intolerance of rules and the inner satisfaction we take in finding private solutions to collective problems. In Italy, there is no real public pressure for a new, fairer, tax system. People simply evade the one they have.

We see ourselves as so many Robinson Crusoes, cast away on a crowded peninsula.

4 THE TRUMAN FACTOR

How many newspapers, apart from sports papers, are sold in Italy every day? Five million. How many Italians regularly go into bookshops? Five million. How many browse news web sites? Five million. How many tune into Sky TG24 and TG La? news? Five million. How many watch current affairs programs on late-evening TV? Five million, across the political spectrum.

You get the feeling they're the same people so we'll call them the Five Million Club. Are they important? Obviously, but they don't decide elections. On the other hand, television - and not just news bulletins - is pivotal because it moulds images, sends out signals, jerks knees, tells you some things and, crucially, hushes up others.

Guess who owns private television and controls public TV in Italy. It's like Peter Weir's fine film, *The Truman Show*. Someone helped us think.

5 THE HOOVER FACTOR

Hoover, founded in 1908 at New Berlin (now Canton) in Ohio, is synonymous with vacuum cleaners, which is why we Hoover with them. Hoover's door-to-door salesmen were, and still are, tenacious, legendarily skilful psychologists, ruthless in their pursuit of a sale. Mr B. has brought a flair for commercial seduction with him from his previous careers in construction, television and advertising, and now applies it to politics. He knows the message has to be easily digestible, appealing and reassuring. He believes in repeating it. And he is convinced that in an appearances-obsessed nation, image is key. In Italy, making the right impression wins hands down over doing the right thing.

6 THE ZELIG FACTOR

All politicians need to be able to identify with their interlocutors. Few are capable of actually turning into them. A need for approval has taught Mr B. transformation skills Woody Allen's Zelig would be proud of. A family man with his children (and two wives, while it lasted). A ladies' man with the ladies. Youthful with the young. Wise with the old. A night owl with the night set. A worker at the workplace. Entrepreneurial with the business community. A football fan at the stadium. Rossonero to the core with AC Milan supporters. Milanese with the people of Milan. Lombard with the people of Lombardy. Italian with people from southern Italy. A Neapolitan among Neapolitans (and their music). If he went to see a basketball game, he'd walk out taller.

7 THE HAREM FACTOR

Silvio's predilection for women, long an open secret in his business circles and then in Rome's corridors of power, became public knowledge in 2009 when he attended Noemi Letizia's eighteenth birthday party and reports began to circulate about his soirées at Palazzo Grazioli. At first, Mr B. denied everything, before owning up ("Am I faithful? Frequently") and then flaunting the tag ("I'm no saint"). The revelations left him unscathed. He lost his wife, but not his electoral base. Lots of Italians who prefer self-indulgence to self-discipline admit that Mr B. does what they can only dream of doing.

But there's more to this than titillation. Youth is contagious, as they knew in ancient Greece (where pretty young things of both sexes took advantage to learn from the old). One of Mr B.'s long-term associates recalls how restless the great man

was during marathon meetings: “He was clearly worried he’d catch old age from us”.

8 THE MEDICI FACTOR

Together with the Comune, or municipality, the Signoria (absolute lordship) is Italy’s only original political invention. All the others, from feudalism to monarchy, totalitarianism, federalism and parliamentary democracy, have been imported from France, Britain, Germany, Spain or the United States. Their Italian incarnations have always been slightly artificial, from Fascism’s toe-curling awkwardness to today’s passive Parliament. But a Signoria stirs ancient instincts.

The attitude of many modern Italians towards Mr B. is reminiscent of how their forebears viewed the Signore: “We know he’s thinking about his own glory, family and interests but we hope he’ll spare a thought for us, too”. Giuseppe Prezzolini noted: “Since they were forced to lead such a pitfall-strewn life, the Signori learned to be penetrating observers of men.” Cosimo, founder of Florence’s great Medici dynasty, is reported to have been a prudent man, capable of summing people up at a single glance. Mr B. is also reckoned to be a formidable judge of human nature, to which he looks for admiration, not criticism; adulation, not betrayal; and affection, not appraisal.

9 THE TINA FACTOR

T.I.N.A., There Is No Alternative. Margaret Thatcher’s classic acronym says it all about many voters. The Centre-Left’s alternative has proved unappetizing: strife-torn coalitions, woolly proposals and hypocritical posturing. Communism’s influence on the Democratic Party is undeniable, as Mr B. never fails to point out. Romano Prodi’s suspiciously symmetrical failures – elected in 1996 and 2006 to be turfed out in 1998 and 2008 – has a certain aesthetic charm but left a cumbersome heritage.

Italians are realists. Before choosing what they think is right, they take what they believe to be useful. Some of Mr B.’s initiatives have been well received, or at least better received than the alternative: abolition of the ICI tax on first homes, fighting illegal immigration, the campaign against organised crime and the reform of the highway code. If they prove to be successful, there are plenty of media channels there to remind us of the fact. And if they aren’t, there’s someone ready to sweep it all under the carpet.

And a united Centre-Right is at least as reassuring as a divided Centre-Left is annoying. If the only way to keep a political alliance together is to own it, Mr B. was quick to work out the cost, in terms of economics, politics and nervous energy.

Without realising it, Mr B. has followed the advice of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who said, apropos FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover: “It’s probably better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in”.

That explains his contemptuous expulsion of Gianfranco Fini, co-founder of the People of Freedom. In 2010, after sixteen years inside the tent, Fini dared to leave without indicating which way he would be pointing.

10 THE PALIO FACTOR

You’ve probably heard about the Palio horse race in Siena. Winning is a huge source of satisfaction for the “contrade”, the districts that take part. But there is an equally great source of satisfaction: watching your arch-rival district lose. Lots of things work like that in Italy, from geography to industry, culture, administration, the professions and sports: Lazio fans were delighted to lose to Inter Milan to prevent AS Roma from winning the *scudetto*.

Politics is no exception, of course. Tribal loyalties are not tactical: they’re instinctive. To keep the Left they perceive as unreliable out of power, many Italians would have voted for the Devil. Now, Mr B. can be pretty diabolical. But Satan’s style is something else.
