

Here They Go Again: Debating, Italian Style (Monologuing!)

Rodrigo Praino (April 02, 2008)



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Let's look for a moment at one of the nice debates we've been organizing election after election in the United States. Within one of those, take out all the pesky rules of engagement. Who needs them really? Now take out all the bothersome questions journalists, experts and people from the audience are always nagging the candidates with. Who needs those? While you're at it, take out every single time limit to the candidates' statements—time constrictions just block the wonderful flow of their ideas and propositions. Finally, just take out the opponent altogether, that annoying person beside your candidate who's always telling lies and making bad proposals. Who needs him? Certainly not the Italian candidates for Prime Minister! What you've got at this point are two separate monologues.



A non-controlled, non-guided, non-interrupted monologue! It's wonderful, isn't it? A candidate can speak, explain everything he wishes, go through his own platform and then some journalist will (maybe!) put the monologues together during the evening news. Yes, that's what democracy is all about!

American voters are used to seeing their candidates debate live on national television. The first debate to be televised was between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Following that there were the famous and infamous performances of Gerry Ford, Ronald Reagan and Al Gore, just to cite a few among the most famous. Almost always there is a winner and a loser, but on a higher level of analysis, a level that leaves little room to fallacious political contingencies, the only winner is always Democracy – yes, last time the word "democracy" in this article was written with a small "d", but now we need a capital "D". Democracy is based on debate. All Parliaments in the world work thanks to debate. The voters have the right to see a good old fashion debate between their candidates for public office.

It doesn't really matter whose fault is it. It seems that Berlusconi holds that the current Italian law on "equal conditions", a law designed to protect the basic rules of pluralism in the political debate through the media, does not allow a direct confrontation between himself and Veltroni. On the other hand, Veltroni stated that he had already accepted to debate any political adversary a long time ago—although it seems he is not working as hard as he can to set up this particular confrontation with Berlusconi. I'm using the expression "it seems" because all this long-distance "debate" about the debate is almost a taboo; there are very few declarations and articles about it, as if it were something that one must not talk about at this delicate point in time. Quite an odd situation if you think about it. Only two years ago all the major Italian cities were full of petitioners calling Mr. Prodi a "chicken" because "it seemed" that he didn't want to debate against Mr. Berlusconi—yes, I know, Italians don't say "chicken", they say "rabbit", but that's what they meant! And all this talk seems even more weird if you can think all the way back to 2001 when it was Mr. Berlusconi who refused to debate against the then center-left Prime Minister candidate Francesco Rutelli, declaring that Mr. Rutelli was not the real leader of his coalition but only a front-man.

The bottom line is that a simple debate between candidates for public office is something that Italian voters cannot take for granted. But then again, in a country where voters—thanks to an electoral law approved right before the 2006 elections—don't get to vote for their own representatives in the national Parliament, and must simply give their vote to a political party that chooses the candidates for them, maybe the fact that these "candidates" for Prime Minister (an office that is not elected by the Italian people, but by the Italian Parliament) are not eager to debate face-to-face is not the worse threat to Democracy in Italy.

At this point the famous sentence pronounced by Ronald Reagan during the Presidential debates of the 80's that publicly embarrassed President Jimmy Carter almost sounds like a warning to the Italian people: here they go again!

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