

Federalism Flounders (But What Next?)

Judith Harris (September 25, 2012)



The Polverini scandal (her resignation Monday as President of the Lazio Region) marks a new sea change in Italian politics because it overturns the idea that decentralization is the solution to Italy's problems.

ROME - Renata Polverini's resignation Monday as President of the Lazio Region has given a severe jolt to an already shaky system. In the largest sense, the scandal of wasted and stolen political funds in the region around Rome symbolizes the failure of two decades of attempts to redress the excesses of state centralism that harked back through the postwar period into the Mussolini regime. Centralism collapsed under the weight of the political-judiciary scandals known as Mani Pulite (Operation Clean Hands), which began with an inquiry into Socialist party (PSI) corruption shenanigans in 1992 and ended with the collapse of the Italian First Republic. With that collapse came the demise of the three largest political parties: Christian Democracy, the PSI itself, and the



Italian Communist party (PCI), already weakened by the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

During the twenty years of the de facto Second Republic since then, a feeble leftist coalition ruled Italy for only three years under economist Romano Prodi before passing the hand to media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, who dominated Italian politics for the next 17 years. Berlusconi's support rested upon the backing of the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI); of the truculent populist Northern League, which preached decentralization via federalism, and of the nostalgic rightists of Alleanza Nazionale, heirs to the old postwar Italian Social Movement (MSI).

The Polverini scandal marks a new sea change in Italian politics because it overturns the idea that decentralization is the solution to Italy's problems. By one estimate, local, provincial and regional governing bodies have wasted at the very least E 30 billion (\$40 billion) and perhaps as much as E 70 billion (\$85 billion). Despite there being some fine local administrations, localism, known here as federalism, is in disrepute, and it is no coincidence that the entire family of the Northern League's sullied former leader Umberto Bossi is mired in corruption scandals. A sobering consequence, as many here point out, is that the now compromised local administrations were training and recruiting grounds for national office; now, no one knows where new recruits will be found.

Polverini is, in her way, a Roman equivalent of Bossi. Born into a trade unionist family in 1962, she boasts of her just-folks origins, and became head of the small rightist trade union UGL in 2006. Running against her in early 2010 for regional president was an experienced Radical party leader, Emma Bonino. Polverini won with the backing of the Italian bishops, to whom Radical policies in favor of abortion, birth control and euthanasia were and are anathema. Conservatives ate up Polverini's rightist version of populism, and Berlusconi's "People of Liberty" party (PdL) threw their considerable support behind her government.

Even many leftists found Governor Polverini simpatica for her feisty ways. One day she took a big forkful of a favorite Roman pasta speciality, spaghetti all'Amatriciana, and stuffed it into the mouth of Umberto Bossi, saying, "There, admit it's good!" By this she meant that Northerner Bossi had better not underestimate Rome. The symbolic gesture increased her local popularity, and all the more so for her spilling tomato sauce, cheese and bacon down Bossi's shirt front. But then, as Polverini likes to say, "I'm not scared even of the Devil." One such devil is cancer, and when she was operated for a cancer this summer, she told no one.

Nor did Berlusconi scare her off when he telephoned at the last minute Monday to try to dissuade her, for a second time, to desist from resigning. This time she not only refused to bow to PdL pressures, caused by that party's fear of national repercussions in elections slated for Spring, but she also publicly declared that the regional council she headed until Monday was "unworthy." Moreover, she vowed, she will "tell the hallucinating things I've seen here" and name names.

Her resignation has brought praise from Catholic centrist politician Pier Ferdinando Casini, for one. Alessandro Barbano, editorialist of the Romans' favorite newspaper *Il Messaggero*, sentenced that, "It's a healthy gesture, that weakens some of the perverse energy that informs so many Italian affairs...verbose inertia, ambushes, toxins, poisons that turn it into an impotent caricature of itself." Contorted words, perhaps, but they evoke the climate.

Just what made her decide, after two and a half years, to call it quits, if she had known this all along? First, she lost the support of the Italian Church, whose bishops say they are disgusted by the immorality revealed in the Laziogate affair, and have severely warned the country's clergy to remain neutral in any coming election. Secondly, there is a wave of citizens' disgust. At the official office of the Region in Rome's La Balduina neighborhood, a wall poster of a grinning Polverini was smeared with the word "Mignotta," a vulgar Roman term for prostitute. A housewife stormed into that



same office, saying, "Thieves! How could you steal money that was to go to our schools and hospitals?" Indeed, some hospitals have actually shut down sections for lack of funds and others, like that at Bracciano in Lazio, are close to shutting down entirely. In elementary schools in Lazio parents have come in to paint filthy walls, and children are being asked to bring their own toilet paper and supplies normally provided, down to writing paper.

I asked a local architect his opinion of her resignation. "I drank a toast," he said. "But don't tell me she didn't know all that was going on a long time ago."

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