



Mattarella's Inauguration Brings Ovations, Smiles

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"Our goal is to be a people with a true sense of community, who walk with new hope toward a future of serenity and peace," Italy's new President Sergio Mattarella, 74, said at his inauguration Feb. 4. His 30-minute speech was interrupted by no less than nine standing ovations and 42 rounds of applause. Almost two-thirds of the electoral college had voted for him, and in the end even a few opponents were clapping hands and smiling.

ROME – During his 30-minute inaugural speech Feb. 4, Italy's new President Sergio Mattarella, 74, was interrupted by no less than nine standing ovations and 42 rounds of applause. In the end, almost two-thirds of the electoral college had voted for him, and even a few opponents, including from Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) were clapping hands and smiling.

The sense was above all of relief: after the fears of a repetition of the dragged-out, stalemated presidential election of 2013, an eminently respectable president was elected, and swiftly; the



government headed by Matteo Renzi (and Renzi himself) gained solidity; the legislature appeared likely to endure without hurried new elections, and, whatever the political push-and-pull, the legislators could return to their calendar of much-needed reforms. Phew!

Crozza-Mattarella

Nowhere was the sense of light-heartedness more exemplified than by Italy's sardonic comic known simply as "Crozza," a regular feature on La Sette TV network. Crozza gives the Italian political tradition of trasformismo new meaning as, seemingly without effort, he transforms himself into anyone he likes. This week his choice fell, naturally, on the new president, portrayed as so totally dull and gray that Crozza himself broke up laughing over his own parody.

In Crozza's version of the inaugural speech, "Mattarella" said that his favorite novel was the Gazzetta Ufficiale, "but don't tell me how it ends, I want to be surprised." (The Gazzetta Ufficiale is the government's dry-as-dust listing of laws, contracts, and public competitions.) Here are a few more Crozzas attributed to the new head of state:

- "I'm uncomfortable being here on TV in color. I'm a man in gray."
- "When I was a schoolboy I went so unnoticed that my fellow students would hang their coats on me."
- "On the roll call they put me down as 'others.'"
- "On my passport photo I'm the guy behind."
- "The highlighters I keep on my desk are all gray."

And of course Crozza was not the only one making jokes. Said a headline on the front page of La Repubblica daily "A hermit in the Quirinal Palace." Another was this: "Mattarella's new style - In politics, a low tone of voice."

Not every joke was funny, however. Former Premier Silvio Berlusconi, still performing weekly social services for his tax fraud conviction, was invited to attend the inauguration (his invitation has been much criticized), but was reportedly miffed at being seated in Row 6.

After making a wisecrack about the president's white hair, for whatever reason his venom spilled over when he encountered Rosy Bindi at the inaugural ceremony and said to her: "I saw that you were so moved you shed tears. I would not have expected so many tears from a man like Bindi, oh I beg your pardon, from a woman."

Bindi is no beauty queen, but she served as vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies for five years, was president of the Partito Democratic (PD) for four, at various times was a cabinet minister, and has headed the parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission since 2013. To this rude remark she retorted, "And from you I would have expected a bit more gallantry."

"My dear, I am always gallant."

Actually, not always. During a live TV broadcast back in October 2009 Bindi criticized Berlusconi, at that time premier, for his having opined that the Italian president should use his influence upon the Corte Costituzionale, Italy's supposedly independent highest court. To Bindi's criticism Premier Berlusconi responded with a snide wisecrack, "I note that you are more beautiful than intelligent."

In Bindi's back story there was a long commitment to Catholic Action, and she began in politics in the same left wing of the Christian Democratic party to which Mattarella belonged in his early career. Indeed, some of the waspier comments, in between rounds of applause, were that Mattarella's election represents a revival of Christian Democracy (DC), the party that had dominated Italian politics from the end of World War II until it disappeared with the end of the Italian First Republic back in 1994.



Both Bindi and Mattarella belonged to the party's progressive wing dominated by the influential Florentine mayor Giorgio La Pira (1904-1997) and the martyred Aldo Moro, the DC president held captive 55 days until his murder by the Red Brigades in Rome on May 9, 1978. Their experiences and lives were all powerful influences on President Mattarella.

So, of course, was the murder of Mattarella's older brother by the Mafia in their native Sicily in 1980, an act which precipitated Sergio's entry into politics. And it was perhaps for this reason that, in his short inaugural speech, Sergio Mattarella made a point of mentioning a two-year-old Jewish boy, Stefano Tache', shot and killed by Palestinian terrorist commandos in front of the Rome synagogue in October 1982. "He was our little boy, a little Italian boy," said the new president.

His goal, Mattarella went on to say, was to restore confidence in Italy's public administrations and institutions. It is time in Italy to reflect upon "the blithe faces of the children, the curious faces of the youngsters. The worried faces of the elderly in difficulty, the faces of those who suffer, the ill and their families who are carrying heavy burdens. The faces of the young people hunting for work and of those who have lost their jobs. The faces of those who have had to shut down a business because of the economic downturn, the face of those who give generously of their time for the benefit of others. The voice of those who do not give in to bullying, who fight against injustice, who seek a way to restore themselves."

We must be, he concluded, "a people with a true sense of community and who walk with new hope toward a future of serenity and peace."

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