

Civil Unions: Debate is Fierce but the Voting Goes Forward

Judith Harris (February 11, 2016)



Despite some 5,000 amendments proposed by Sen. Roberto Calderoli of the Northern League, on Feb. 10 the Italian Senate began the voting process on the government's highly controversial bill that would recognize civil unions for gay couples. As tough back room negotiations among governing partners and the opposition continue, the final vote is due by Feb. 23.

Just in case anyone missed the message, several participants in the [San Remo Song Festival](#) [2], which is underway this week, sported rainbow-hewed ribbons meant to show their support for the pending bill that would legalize civil unions. Popular singer Noemi twined the ribbon stream around the mike while another singer, [Arisa](#) [3], wore them on her wrist. It has not gone unnoticed that openly gay [Elton John](#) [4] is the visiting superstar of the Festival.

As this suggests, what had in the past been a strictly sentimental song competition, beloved of Italians young and old, has taken on political colors as never before. Indeed, some Neapolitan contestants are eschewing sentimental love songs "[O Sole Mio](#) [5]" style for a more socially committed rap. (For more photos, [>>>](#) [6])

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that would recognize civil unions for gay couples. As backroom negotiations among governing partners and the opposition continue, the formal debate begins only next Tuesday, Feb. 16. The predictably fierce battle is due to end with a final vote just seven days later, when the upper house is obliged to deal with other pending business.

Calderoli had initially tried to stall debate through having his software churn out some 75 million amendments, which he had placed on a CD and handed over to the Senate last September. It required eighty Senate officials working for six days, 19 hours a day, to insert these manually into the text of the proposed law. But when it was discovered that it would require 161 years (yes! 161) to have them all read aloud in the Senate, as the law requires, Senate President Piero Grasso had them thrown out -- hence the 5,000.

Nevertheless the government headed by Premier [Matteo Renzi](#) [8] has now chalked up a minor victory. After remaining locked into silence for weeks, Senate President [Grasso](#) [9], who had the constitutional obligation to decide upon allowing a secret ballot, pronounced against it this past Tuesday. If allowed, secrecy in the ballot box would have permitted many, including some Catholic senators within Renzi's own splintered Partito Democratico, to ignore party directives and vote against civil unions. Secondly, it appears likely that the bill will pass, even if the most controversial elements of the law, surrogate maternity and stepchild adoptions, are not. Most importantly, although this is the toughest debate so far under Renzi, the vote, whether it passes or not, will not put his government itself at risk.

Grasso is a former judge who rose to fame (and around-the-clock bodyguards to this day) as one of the presiding justices at the famous maxi-trial of the Mafia in Palermo in 1987. After announcing that there will be no secrecy, Grasso said that he is "neither Pontius Pilate nor Don Abbondio" -- that is, neither one to wash his hands of the question nor fundamentally a coward like the priest Don Abbondio, a character in [I Promessi Sposi](#) [10]. "I was a judge," he reminded his critics, "and I stick strictly to the Constitution. My personal beliefs play no role in my decisions."

As now written, the pending bill, known as the Cirinnà law for its author, Senator [Monica Cirinnà](#) [11], would recognize stepchild adoption -- that is, adoption of the child of one partner in a same-sex union by the second partner. The European court of human rights ruled in 2015 that Italy errs in failing to offer legal protection to such children.

The second clause generating even more controversy is surrogate maternity, today illegal in Italy and opposed by many here who support civil unions. Interior Minister Angelino Alfano, for one, albeit a member of the Renzi cabinet, has said that the so-called "wombs for rent" should be punishable with prison sentences as "an illicit trade" which he considers the equivalent of a sex crime. Alfano has said, however, that he supports civil unions.

In the U.S. surrogacy is permitted in several states and under some conditions, but in Michigan, for one, it is a felony. The issue remains controversial in several countries within the European Union. This is a serious issue here, and even Premier Renzi is on record as opposing that clause. Stepchild adoptions are similarly opposed by many who otherwise support civil union legalization. That said, the Cirinnà bill may nevertheless pass without these two highly controversial clauses.

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