

Silvio...This Has Gone Too Far! Basta!

Maria Rita Latta (May 10, 2009)



After 19 years of marriage and three children, Veronica Lario decided to divorce her husband, the Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi. It quickly became news in Italy, and not only in Italy . The issue exploded with Veronica's angry accusation that her husband was considering some young actresses and models as candidates in the upcoming elections to the European parliament.

Veronica Lario Berlusconi chose to express her displeasure in the most public way possible, by sending an email to the ANSA news agency in which she said she and her children had "suffered" from Mr Berlusconi's flirtatious and indiscrete behaviour with younger women. She also expressed her rage at the reports that Berlusconi's political party was lining up TV showgirls and pin-ups as political candidates, defining it "[shameless rubbish to entertain the emperor](#) [2]." A former actress herself, Veronica said that the prime minister has shown a "lack of discretion in his exercise of power which offends the credibility of all [women], damages women in general, and especially those who



have always struggled to defend their rights.”

According to the press, a few days before Mr. Berlusconi held a meeting of his ruling center-right party Popolo della Libertà (PdL) to vet candidates for the European elections. They included a TV starlet, a former beauty queen, and a former contestant on the “Big Brother” reality show. Needless to say, the media’s comments have been rather sarcastic, and this stirred up Veronica Lario’s reaction: “I want it to be quite clear that my children and I are victims and not accomplices in this situation,” she said.

Mr. Berlusconi’s wife also lashed out at the premier’s reported attendance at an 18th birthday party of Noemi Letizia, a Neapolitan girl, saying she was surprised “because he never came to any of his children’s 18th birthday parties, even though he was invited.” Noemi, who was quoted as saying that she calls Berlusconi “papi” (or “daddy”) was photographed sporting a gold and diamond necklace the premier gave her as a birthday gift. “I can’t be with a man who is involved with minors,” the premier’s wife commented to the press.

It is not the first time that the usually private Veronica Lario has publicly complained about her husband’s reported flirtations. Two years ago, she obtained a public apology from Mr Berlusconi after she wrote an open letter to [La Repubblica](#) [3](a left-leaning newspaper daily critical of Berlusconi) complaining about her husband’s telling TV starlet Mara Carfagna: “If I weren’t married, I would marry you immediately.” Carfagna is now Berlusconi’s minister for equal opportunity.

After this recent public “attack,” Berlusconi went on the prime-time TV show Porta a Porta (Door-to-Door) hosted by Bruno Vespa on the state-run television station RAI to defend himself, this time offering no apology for his plan to sex up Italy’s image in the European Parliament. Instead, he started referring to Veronica as “la Signora,” indeed a distant and formal definition for a person who was his wife of 23 years, repeating that she should publicly apologize for embarrassing him and admit she was wrong. In his opinion, his wife was the victim of “manipulation by the left,” which had spread unfounded reports about why he is picking women from the showbusiness world and converting them into “politicians.” He claimed that this is due to his party’s willingness “to renew our political class with people who are cultivated and well-repared” — unlike the “malodorous and badly dressed people who currently represent certain parties in parliament.” He insisted that he would put the so-called showgirls, or young women, on his electoral list and personally accompany them on the campaign trail. He also said that the suggestion by his wife and the media that he has a relationship with an 18-year-old girl is a lie, and that his presence at Noemi Letizia’s party was due to his friendship with her parents. He then concluded: “This is a personal issue that pains me, it’s private, and it should not be talked about.”

Since Veronica Lario erupted in public by email, an incredible phenomenon has taken place that should be studied by sociologists: the main news on Italian television and most other media outlets has not been the economic crisis or Fiat’s initial success in the US. Attention has been totally focused on this soap opera of sorts, with Veronica and Silvio as the protagonists. Early this morning, sipping my cappuccino at a café in Rome I heard people around me talking about this issue, commenting on the latest developments and supporting the premier or his wife with unexpected passion. It was like watching an episode that literally glued viewers to the screen, with the plot presenting the typical archetypes of the Belpaese: the betrayed wife, the libertine rich and aged husband looking for confirmation of his perpetual virility, the much younger woman, the sainted mother, and a series of yes-men from the emperor’s court who defend their boss.

In an [interview with La Repubblica](#) [4]Noemi Letizia said of Berlusconi: “Papi brought me up. He’s always been kind to me. I adore him. He calls me, he tells me he has some free time, and I join him in Milan or Rome. I stay there listening to him. That’s what he wants from me. Then we sing together.” Asked whether she hoped to run in the forthcoming regional elections, she replied: “No. I’d prefer to run for the lower house of parliament. Papi Silvio will fix it.” She also denied rumours that she was Berlusconi’s illegitimate daughter.

The pathos of the soap reached its highest levels when Italian papers published pictures of the now-notorious birthday party, but also new ones suggesting that she could have been a secret, illegitimate daughter. The photos, indeed, showed an atmosphere that was as wild as a First



Communion, with the premier toasting with the huge family and the many guests, grandmothers and waiters included. In the meantime, Italian creativity once again contributed to the lighter side of the situation when some bloggers created a fake website entitled “Brinda Con Papi” (Toast with Daddy), portraying thousands of “reinterpretations” of the shots of the party.

The Italian Catholic daily Avvenire reprimanded the prime minister for his “[self-declared weakness for actresses in the bloom of youth](#) [5],” and urged the 72-year-old billionaire to control himself. “We know that a man of government is judged by what he achieves, for his programs, and for the quality of the laws that he contributes to passing,” it stated. “But neither should the quality of a leader, his style, and his values, be inconsequential—they cannot be. We ask that the prime minister be more sober, somber, and a mirror of the country’s soul.” The next day, a Vatican cardinal said that the prime minister’s behaviour “seems strange to us—over the top.”

The last polls are showing that Berlusconi’s popularity apparently has not been hurt by his wife’s decision to divorce him. The premier, though, is conscious that the Italians do not care about what their politicians do in their private life, but many of them do pay attention to the church’s opinion. Not to mention that a protracted divorce procedure could lead Italians to take sides, with the risk that his female electors could sympathize with the “humiliated” Veronica, and decide not to vote for him anymore.

Silvio Berlusconi has built his political career on a peculiar mix of his private and public life, by projecting the image of a family man while stressing his fame for virility, and by appearing in public with his children while surrounding himself with young women looking at him in adoration. As for the private aspect, Veronica’s email suggests that image may be fake. The next European election might reveal how the Italians feel about the public aspect of their emperor’s life.

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