

Berlusconi, the inventor of modern populism and prototype of Trump, has died.



by Guido Mina di Sospiro

Berlusconi died a few days ago in Milan at the age 86. He is already remembered as one of the most controversial figures of the late XX century, as well as of the first quarter of the current one. His personal history is remarkably similar to Trump's.

Berlusconi's father was a bank manager who gave part of his severance package to his son for him to start what would become a real estate empire; then Berlusconi went on to build three national TV networks, wrenching away the monopoly from state television RAI. He then bought the now legendary soccer team AC Milan and with it went on to win twenty-nine trophies thus becoming the most successful president of any soccer club in history. He founded a bank and an insurance company that

are now all over the country, and bought the Mondadori publishing conglomerate, thus becoming the owner of the most important conglomerate in Italy. He also bought a national newspaper, *Il Giornale*, and accomplished many more things. His divertissements with very young women are legendary and hard to believe, though more than perverted they verged on the pornographic/burlesque. But that happened much later in his life.

In 1992 he saw Italy veer to the Left, and in order to save her (or to save his many companies, his detractors maintain to this day), he founded a new party, Forza Italia, and entered politics with a famous announcement ("Italy is the Country that I love, ...") that decades later would be echoed by Trump's decision to do as much. Back in 1992, at least half of Italy derided that naïve newcomer, until four months later, the head of a four-month old party, he astoundingly won the general elections. And thus began a ping-pong match between the Right and the Left that has lasted to this day—notably, Berlusconi died a senator, whose party is part of the coalition of the current administration, led by PM Meloni.

Even this brief biographical sketch makes it clear that for Berlusconi to become what he became he stepped on a lot of toes, sometimes, it would seem, with glee. The expression I normally use is: "he broke the toy." What toy? Until the late 1970s, Italy was run simultaneously by a Center-Right government, which would change periodically but remain, in effect, the same; the opposition, i.e., the very powerful Communist Party, the largest in the West; the then very influential unions; and the factory workers, with their innumerable strikes. When Fiat, Olivetti, Italcantieri or other large factories needed to lay off workers, half the Country would explode. The companies would explain that without the layoffs they would fail, and then close. So the solution was to lay off the redundant workers, many thousands of them at times, but to give them full pay until they found a

new job or they were rehired by the same company (it was called "cassa integrazione"). It worked like a charm: the government was happy because it would stay in power; the Communist Party and the unions were the proud winners, along with the laid off workers; and the companies, were also the winners, as the government would routinely pick up the tab for the very costly "cassa integrazione." But where did all that money come from? From taxpayers. Then there was the "scala mobile," and that is, the sliding wage scale which consisted in increasing the wages as the prices rose in order to maintain the purchasing power of the workers in the face of inflation. In Italy it was introduced in 1945, modified several times since and definitely removed only in 1992. That too was courtesy of taxpayers. Between the "scala mobile" and the "cassa integrazione," the national debt grew and grew, so much so that it is now one of the largest among developed nations. That is what I refer to as "the toy," as well as several other such contrivances. What Berlusconi did is he brought market laws to Italy, eventually on a national scale. With him, it was demand and supply, no longer convoluted compromises between opposing forces at the expense of taxpayers.

Half the Country loved Berlusconi, the other half hated him. Indeed, there was the Berlusconi Derangement Syndrome. Otherwise perfectly reasonable middle-aged gentlemen and ladies would become incensed at the mere mention of his name. They were usually unable to explain why they were so infuriated, but infuriated they were. Berlusconi exploited the remnants of a fading Communist sentiment to appeal to those who feared or disliked the Left. It was all presented as a clash between Fascists and Communists, though there were neither fascists nor Communists. Indeed, Berlusconi was a moderate businessman from the Center-Right who wanted that Country to thrive as all his companies did. Yet there were many closet Berlusconi's much like today there are many closet Trumpians.

It must be noted in passing that Berlusconi was a much more successful entrepreneur and businessman than Trump, and a visionary, who essentially invented modern populism, and even when it came to soccer (the world's most popular sport), the early incarnation of AC Milan, the one led by Sacchi, is universally acknowledged as the greatest soccer team of all times. He was far more eloquent than Trump, more educated, had a sense of humor, and lacked Trump's mean streak. He made fun of his opponents, and memorably so, but did not insult them.

Since the outcome of the general elections was always uncertain in Italy, and indeed Berlusconi managed to win three times, so for three times he was prime minister, the opposition used another weapon: judiciary persecution. Berlusconi, who as an entrepreneur had never had any problem with the law, was tried over thirty times. Among the many accusations that were leveled at him there was his alleged collusion with the Mafia. Does it ring a bell? Russia, Russia, Russia! Mafia, Mafia, Mafia! No judiciary inquest was ever able to prove anything, and he was therefore always acquitted, except for one time, later on in his life, when an accountant of his forgot to pay some minor taxes—Berlusconi was for decades the number 1 taxpayer in the country. He was sentenced to community service, which he did in a nursing home, where he went to tell jokes and bring his *simpatia* to the point that all the patients and the staff ended up loving him (and when his community service was done, he left a big donation to the nursing home).

Back in 2016, being, unlike most Americans, fully aware of Berlusconi's precedent, I predicted in an article published on the since defunct Disinformation.com that Trump would win the elections. As during the days of ancient Rome, in which so many different types of government were tried, contemporary Italy is a factory of politics, ahead of other western democracies by decades. My prediction is that somehow Trump will manage to resist also the current judiciary persecution

and, if allowed to run, will win the election. There will be much turbulence and division for another decade or so, and then, in all hopefulness, a leader such as Italy's Giorgia Meloni, who was elected as an exponent of the far-Right but who, to everyone's surprise, has been governing judiciously and with moderation while not betraying her campaign promises. Time will tell...