

Italy: Berlusconi - Godfather to Trump and Johnson

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This article, by [Dave Kellaway](#) critically examines the legacy of Silvio Berlusconi, the controversial former Prime Minister of Italy, highlighting his numerous legal battles, alleged mafia connections, and media empire, while questioning the reverence shown towards him on Italian television and the impact of his influence on the political landscape of Italy.

What a spectacle last night on Italian TV's main channel! All men in suits, some with black ties, respectfully agree on what a great man Berlusconi was and how he changed Italian politics. Really, what the *Clean Hands* prosecutor team had done to expose corrupt old parties like the Christian Democrats or the Socialists was okay, but they had gone too far in pursuing him in over 30 legal cases. Maybe this great man was not wrong in talking about a conspiracy against him. Even his old opponent from the Italian Communist Party, D'Alema, did not rock the boat.

No mention of the Mafia links that explain his meteoric rise or his financing of the corrupt prime minister Bettino Craxi, who legislated in favour of his new private TV stations. All this is hardly surprising given that the new hard right government now controls appointments to the public broadcaster and Berlusconi's Mediaset empire is still alive and strong. The latter ran a headline on all its screens saying Grazie Silvio (thanks Silvio).

The leadership of the socially liberal Democratic Party, the PD, has postponed its leadership meeting out of respect. The supposedly more progressive leader, Elly Schlein, looks much like the old team. The Italian state is scandalously giving him a state funeral tomorrow. True heroes and martyrs in the fight against the Mafia, like the assassinated prosecutors Falcone and Borsellino, must be turning in their graves. How can Mattarella, the Italian president, preside over such a charade when his own brother was murdered by the Cosa Nostra? A number of Berlusconi's closest collaborators have been convicted of association with the Mafia. It is widely accepted in Italy that the only logical explanation of Berlusconi's sudden emergence as a big property magnate was the result of dirty money coming his way. It is difficult to win, as he did, all the electoral districts in Sicily without a little help from organised crime.

Silvio Berlusconi was Prime Minister three times and has the post-war record for the longest single term served. His fortune is estimated at around \$7 billion dollars, and he is on the top ten Italian rich list. He faced 30 different legal indictments for conflict of interest, corruption, false accounting, and illegal sexual conduct. Only one was made to stick, and he was convicted of a 'brutal sentence' that consisted of having to do community service in an old people's home for one day a week for a year. While in office, he passed several laws that specifically protected him from the charges he faced. His conviction meant he was barred from office for a period, but he returned and was elected as part of the present government coalition. His party, Forza Italia, is very much the junior partner, with only around 7% of the vote.

Today a friend and comrade, Franca, sent me a few words in a text. She says:

Death does not cancel the real history of somebody even if it falsely exalts it has a legacy. The institutional chorus of praise is a scandal.

He introduces an 'anything goes' attitude in everyday life that was particularly negative for women.

He brought in the cult of the leader, populism, individualism, hatred for taxes - 'they are the hands of the state in your pockets' - drastic privatisation of the economy and extreme machismo.

But what was Berlusconi's real impact and legacy?

He constructed a new hegemonic coalition for Italian capital following the deep crisis of the Christian Democrat and Socialist Party regimes that had governed from the war to the 1980s. Prosecutors from the Clean Hands team had exposed just how corrupt the party system was in Italy. In the vacuum that followed, the property tycoon and media millionaire stepped up to create a new sort of company party built completely around him and his money and then promoted by his TV empire.

The vacuum existed because the main reformist party that led the labour movement, the Italian Communist Party, had consistently sought a historic compromise and coalition government with the corrupt Christian Democrats and had actively held back a vigorous, radical workers movement on the offensive in the 1970s. The ultra left and violent episode of the Red Brigades and their armed struggle strategy further destroyed the development of a possible left alternative.

Berlusconi looked new and different because he was not a career politician at a time when all politicians were seen as corrupt. His new TV stations challenged the rather staid and conventional programming of the state broadcaster. A lot of its programming was trashy and based on exploitative exposure of women's bodies, but it built up a big audience. It was all about feeling good about being a consumer in a capitalist society that everyone could be part of. In the absence of a left alternative, he played the hero entrepreneur who could get things done better than all these lawyers or academically trained politicians. He would give people what they wanted and not make them feel guilty about it. For the business community, including the self-employed or small owners, he promised to deregulate a notorious bureaucratic system of regulation.

The average Italian also associates Berlusconi with two other things: football and his many sexual affairs. Being the owner of one of the most successful sides of the time, Milan, certainly helped build his popularity and his image as a winner. As we have seen with Johnson and Trump, a reputation as a womaniser is not a negative among many voters.

Certainly, Berlusconi was the forerunner of right wing populists like Trump and Johnson in the astute way he used the mass media. Owning a fair chunk of it helped him, of course, but Trump had a media presence through his successful TV show. Johnson came from a journalistic background and had a clever team that exploited social media. As an outsider from the traditional political class, he was less reticent about respecting the rules of political debate and language. Like Trump, Berlusconi made outrageous promises, like the number of jobs his government would generate. Vulgar, incendiary language was routinely used so Berlusconi could joke about Schulz, a German MEP taking the role of a concentration camp Kapo in a film, or Obama being well suntanned. Quite often, he has been filmed telling obscene, misogynist jokes. He once said that for a woman to get on, she

should look for a rich man.

Even more dangerous has been the way Berlusconi has tried to treat the political and legal processes like a market where he can make deals. So the independence of the judiciary is challenged. Just as Trump or Johnson today declare a conspiracy of the judiciary and state against him, Berlusconi regularly said there was a left wing, communist plot by the prosecutors. Unfortunately, the TV shows running non-stop about his death today are giving credence to the idea that the state prosecutors went too far. Johnson also tried to sidestep the rules restricting what a government can legally do during the Brexit process. Today, these right wing populists are also keen to restrict our democratic rights to protest.

Today his final partner, Marta Fascina, who is also an MP, is fighting over who will inherit the ownership of the party symbol. This company-style party was basically a marketing organisation to promote Berlusconi with no real democratic structures. Most commentators think it will disintegrate. Renzi (Italia Viva), Salvini (La Lega), and Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia) are circling like vultures to pick up the 7% of the electorate that his party still represents. They are outdoing themselves by praising his legacy and whitewashing his crimes.

Many years ago, Berlusconi was a member of the P2 Masonic Lodge, which operated like an illegal state within a state to protect capitalist interests against the threat of a leftist government. Today, there is a lot less need for such an operation since the hard right controls so much of the national and local Italian state. Perhaps that is the old scoundrel's greatest legacy.

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P.S.

• Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 13 Jun 2023:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/berlusconi-godfather-to-trump-and-johnson/>

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