

Berlusconi in Britain: Beppe Severgnini (guest blog)

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“A Berlusconi phenomenon is unlikely to happen in Britain, but never say die”. That’s according to leading Italian journalist Beppe Severgnini speaking at [LSE’s Italian Society](#).

Polis intern Davide Morisi reports

“It all began two years ago, when Time Magazine asked me to write an article to explain why Mr Berlusconi took over for the third time”, Severgnini says. But what seemed to be a straight-forward question, soon turned into a pretty tough task. “In Italy, explaining is seen as as a waste of time”, he ironically claims. “We never ask why, we just condemn, shout, or clap our hands”.

“Foxnews-ation”

Explaining the “Berlusconi phenomenon” necessarily leads to a focus on the role of the Italian media, which, from a global perspective, shows potentially worrying trends in the field. Severgnini defines Italian press as “unhealthy” and affected by strongly politically opinionated news corporations. A “foxnews-ation” – as he puts it – is currently threatening Italian media as well as issues of ownership; the main news corporations are currently owned by big banks and companies which influence editorial contents.

He also blames Italian journalism for the lack of reliability and professionalism, while “in the UK there is a different concept of journalism”, he says, implying that there exists a set of values shared by most of the journalists, irrespective to their political orientation. “I think journalism must be a watch-dog, a ‘counter-power’. By saying this, I’m not a hypocrite, as some of my colleagues would argue. I know that we are human, but we are not on sale”.



The Five Million Club



Beppe Severgnini

The discourse on journalism leads directly to one of the main factors that explains the Italian Prime Minister’s success, according to Severgnini’s witty point of view. This concerns a small group of well-informed, well-educated and engaged people who are apparently powerful in shaping the public debate, but ultimately are not effective because they end up speaking to each other and not to the majority of the population. Severgnini calls them the “Five Million Club”, providing an ironic example: “How many people read newspapers every day in Italy? Five million. How many buy at least five books a year? Five million. How many watch political or cultural programmes on television? Five million. I guess that we are surveying always the same group”.

Even journalists belong to this “intelligentsia” that is not able to play a decisive role due to their narrow audiences. As Berlusconi replied to Severgnini in 2001, when asked why he did not care about criticisms by the press: “You journalists don’t matter”.

Castaway in a crowded world

Yet, Severgnini’s latest book highlights several other factors behind Italian Prime Minister’s impressive longevity. These relate not only to his “human appeal” – he wants to look like regular people and be an ordinary guy, but also to the role of Catholicism, the Italian Church and the ancient Italian notion of “Signoria” (a form of absolute lordship invented in Florence in the XV century).

Furthermore, Severgnini describes a particular Italian attraction for the myth of Berlusconi as a self-made man, calling this the “Robinson Crusoe” factor. “Every Italian feels like a castaway in a crowded peninsula, where everyone has to fight against the whole world. Therefore many like the people who become successful by climbing society”, Severgnini states.

Multiple faces

Finally, Severgnini adds another key element, which is probably the emblem at the same time of the Italian Prime Minister’s success and his lack of reliability: the “Zelig Factor”. Like the main character of Woody Allen’s film, Berlusconi turns into innumerable different men, according to the person he is talking to. “He’s a family man and a lady’s man, an entrepreneur and a worker. He is youthful and elder, from Milan in Milan and from Naples in Naples”, Severgnini says. “If he happens to go to a basketball game he even walks out taller”

Despite bitter laugh and dark shadows on Italy’s future, Severgnini still believes in the strength of Italian democracy and doesn’t define “Berlusconi as an autocrat, but more likely as a post-populist”. However, this doesn’t seem a comforting picture, especially if the link between populism and weak media systems applied to other countries. But Severgnini doesn’t go further: as every journalist, his duty stops at explanation and, he claims, “in my book you won’t find any personal comments, but only facts”.

This guest blog by Polis intern Davide Morisi

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