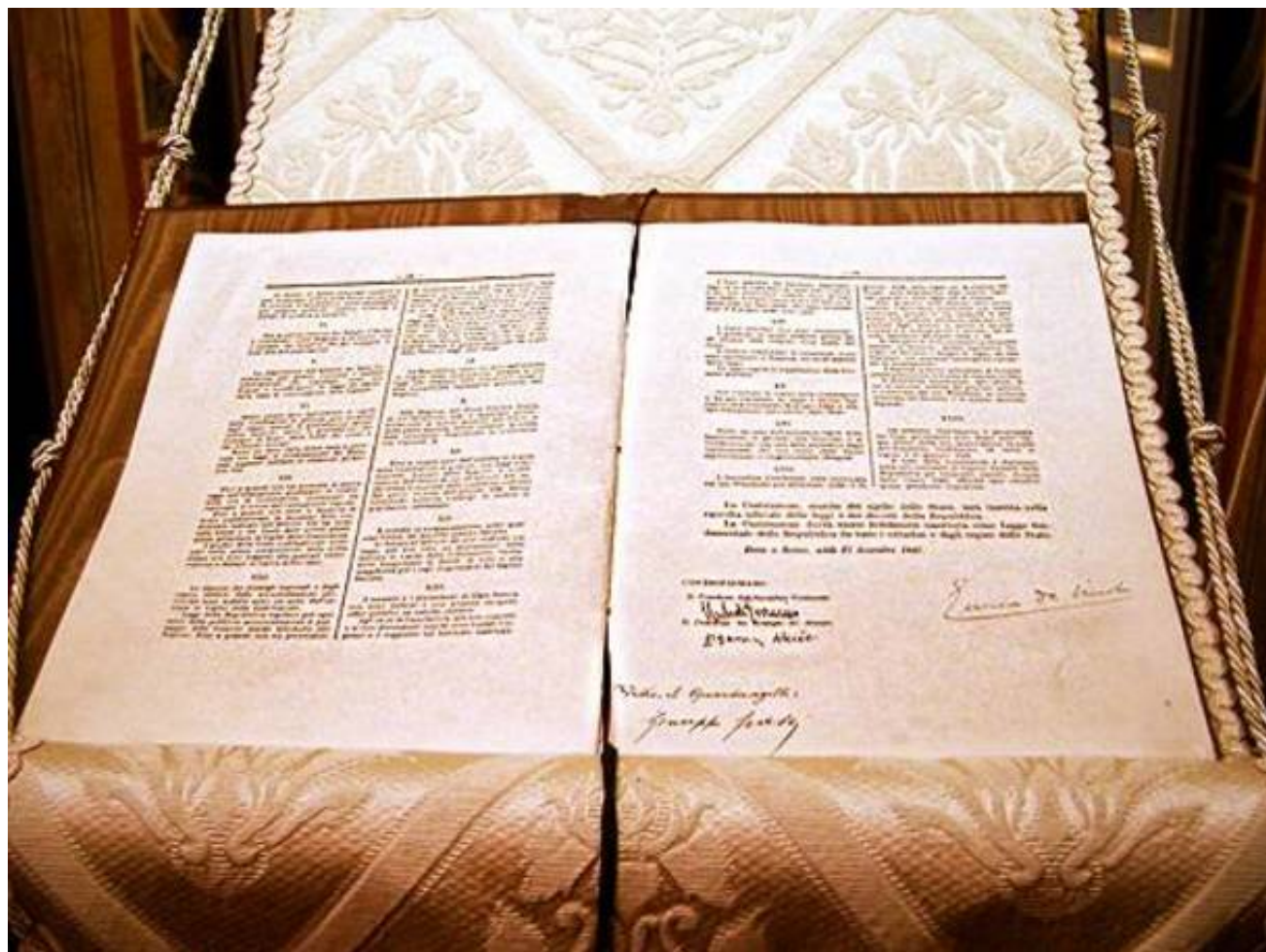


Finì: “Other dangers” Lie on the Political Horizon. But Just What are They?

Judith Harris (May 30, 2010)



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ROME –At a meeting last week of industrialists from [Confindustria](#) [2], the equivalent of the [U.S. National Association of Manufacturers](#) [3], Premier Silvio Berlusconi proposed that its president, Emma Marcegaglia, replace the outgoing Economic Minister Claudio Scajola. (A frequent beneficiary of government contracts paid for most of Scajola's \$2 million apartment overlooking the Coliseum—"unbeknownst to me," Scajola explained lamely before resigning).

No one in the audience overlooked the fact that Berlusconi, in attempting to lure the popular



Marcegaglia into his government, was angling to co-opt Confindustria itself, so when Berlusconi called for a show of hands, only three were raised. This blunt rejection by Confindustria from the audience of 3,000 economic leaders was a stunning rebuff, which the Premier brushed off with a quick, “All right, but then don’t you complain about my government.”

Unperturbed, while in Paris last week Berlusconi blandly mentioned that as premier he, “like Mussolini,” never had the sensation of wielding power over Parliament. This blatant appeal for a more docile parliament was more than one of Berlusconi’s customary gaffes. The country’s top independent political commentators are warning of the grave risks inherent in the government’s attempts to nibble away at constitutional guarantees, which Parliament’s first and only post-Fascist president Gianfranco Fini, of all people, is battling to defend. “Our Constitution is the foundation and guarantee of the unity of the Republic,” Fini told a group of students visiting the Chamber of Deputies the other day. Ambiguously he added, responding to the chorus of criticism at Berlusconi’s comparing himself to Mussolini in relations with Parliament: “Today it’s not a dictatorship that is threatening us, but other dangers.”

Just what those “other dangers” are was not explained. However, one element may be the present government’s dodgy reliance on passing legislation via government decree, which means that a given bill immediately becomes a valid law for three months without debate. Similarly the government constantly calls for votes of confidence which also have the advantage for him of stifling debate in Parliament (as of March 2010, a record number of 31 over 22 months). Both political ploys have drawn fire from Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano, whose position is so delicate and important that he seems almost palpably to be walking on eggs. An aggravating factor, as one commentator pointed out, is that most Italian citizens seem unaware of the gravity of the gradual but relentless attempts to erode the rights they enjoy as a result of their post-World War Two constitution. In the words of author [Umberto Eco](#) [4] (*The Name of the Rose*), “Berlusconi is giving us a sort of ‘homeopathic’ coup d’etat. We’ll find ourselves in a dictatorship without even realizing it.”

Besides bypassing Parliamentary debate, a double-whammy government-proposed gag law is soon to come to a vote. The bill would muzzle a publication’s rights to report what is happening, particularly as it concerns judiciary matters. Because Premier Berlusconi personally owns the largest three private Italian networks and wields nearly total control over the three state-owned radio and TV networks, the gag law will, if passed, actually apply only to the narrow margin of opposition newspapers, spearheaded by the best-selling daily [La Repubblica](#) [5], owned by Carlo De Benedetti. The gag law is opposed by the left, but also by such conservatives as editor Vittorio Feltri, whose newspaper, [Il Giornale](#) [6], is owned by Premier Berlusconi himself.

In addition, in all but a few cases the gag law would—and most likely will—eliminate or seriously curtail the judiciary’s use of wire taps, including in Mafia investigations. On grounds of privacy protection, for instance, no phone bugs can be placed in cafes, including those where mob bosses do their business. The author [Roberto Saviano](#) [7], for one, says that, if such a law had been in place at the time, he would “not have been able to write *Gomorra*.” No less seriously, businessmen doing deals that involve political kickbacks would be protected. Most of the country’s investigating magistrates and top police are doggedly opposing the legislation.

That the public is TV-dependent is beyond doubt. In a broadly-based survey both TV viewers and newspapers readers were asked questions about the economy, such as the Italian growth rate. The TV viewers described the economic growth as twice what it actually was. As a result, until this month the government has pooh-poohed the very existence of a financial crisis, but has now finally been forced to bite the bullet and agree to cut its budget deficit by 24 billion euro (\$29.5 billion). The cuts punish countless already luring Italian cultural institutions and foundations, but they do include a 10% cut in salaries for Members of Parliament (cabinet ministers excepted) who are among the best paid in Europe.



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