

On Both Sides of the Atlantic, Pride in Anti-Mob Action

Judith Harris (January 31, 2011)



While in New York nearly 125 are arrested in “the largest mob roundup in F.B.I. history,” Italian Senator and former governor of Sicily Salvatore Cuffaro is sentenced to 7 years in prison for helping Cosa Nostra bosses

ROME – Their pride was justified. In what American federal officials called [“the largest mob roundup in F.B.I. history”](#) [2]—dawn raids involving 800 federal agents and state and local investigators—125 alleged Mafia racketeers and drug dealers were arrested Jan 19 in the U.S., many in the New York area. Although not all authorities agreed, in the background were concerns that, after two decades of relative quiet, organized crime involving the five big Mafia families of New York has regrouped. By coincidence, at about the same time as the stunning US sweep took place, Italian judiciary authorities were expressing their pride in combating the Sicilian Mafia, but with a difference: the successful prosecution of a ranking political leader on charges of links to the Mafia.

On Jan. 22 the Court of Cassations, Italy’s highest court, found Salvatore (“Totò”) Cuffaro, the former governor of the Sicilian Region (one of twenty such regional governors), guilty of having passed confidential information to Mafiosi about investigations and otherwise aiding and abetting Cosa Nostra. Among other things Cuffaro informed a Sicilian Mafia boss that police had bugged the man’s



house. The sentence, which includes perpetual banishment from public office, upholds a previous Court of Appeals conviction to seven years in prison; in practice, Cuffaro is expected to remain behind bars for five years and five months. And there may be more, if Cuffaro is convicted in a second Mafia trial in which he is a defendant expected to take place in February in Palermo, where he has been indicted on the more serious charge of external support for the Mafia (concorso esterno in associazione mafiosa). A conviction there could bring a sentence of ten years in prison.

It is rare in Italy for a court to succeed in documenting just how politicians and the mob work hand in glove, and so the significance of the case would be hard to overstate. Cuffaro, Sicilian regional governor from 2001 through 2008, was elected to the Italian Senate in 2008 to represent Premier Silvio Berlusconi's [Partito della Libertà](#) [3] (PdL). Cuffaro furthermore is considered responsible for Sicily's having delivered a favorable vote in the 2008 elections for the party created ex novo at that time by Catholic politician [Pier Ferdinando Casini](#) [4]. President of the Chamber of Deputies from 2001 through early 2006, Casini had just broken with Berlusconi and created a new xCasini's party, the Unione del Centro (UdC). The UdC risked failing to achieve the minimum of 8% that permitted representation in the Senate. Cuffaro's help with the Sicilian electorate apparently made the crucial difference.

Interviewed about the Cuffaro conviction, Casini spoke of his old friend and former ally with some fondness, though quickly specifying that the two had "gone separate ways." One has an obligation to respect the law, he declared, "but we cannot overlook so many years of friendship, and we continue to believe that Cuffaro is not a mafioso." Not everyone appreciated this. [Luigi De Magistris](#) [5], former front-line anti-mob magistrate now with the European Parliament representing [Antonio Di Pietro](#) [6]'s Italia dei Valori (IdV) party, protested that in effect Casini was negating the validity of the court sentence. Only four hours after the Rome high court issued its decision a stunned Cuffaro was in Rome's Rebibbia prison, taking with him a book on the Madonna and the Bible, [George Orwell](#) [7]'s 1984 and a novel by Georges Simenon.

Here the story took an unexpected twist. Instead of disappearing with a few gold bars into the suspect arms of a welcoming nation, Cuffaro went off to prison with tears in his eyes but apparent calm, and spoke of relying upon his religious beliefs to aid him in the coming days and years. In prison he was able to speak with some of his former fellow Senators and MPs, to whom he reiterated his respect for the law and for the judges' verdict. These are unusual words in Italy these days, and, no less than the verdict, Cuffaro's citizen-like composure caught the Italian press by surprise. Such exemplary dignity under terrible stress made many feel sympathy for him for the first time. As contrasted with other leading politicians tangling with the law (guess who?), he suddenly looked heroic.

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Links

- [1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/16594cuffarocannoli-11296492909jpg>
- [2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/21/nyregion/21mob.html>
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- [4] <http://www.pierferdinandocasini.it/>
- [5] <http://www.luigidemagistris.it>
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