

Playing it for laughs

Judith Harris (April 11, 2011)



Dissecting what may lie behind three recent Berlusconi's jokes. And the picture is far from amusing

This week Premier Silvio Berlusconi was handing out awards to a group of particularly deserving [Rome University](#) [2] students when he slipped into high entertainment gear. First he suggested that master of ceremonies Andrea Rocchi, who was handing out the academic awards, shave off his little beard ("It looks like you're hiding a malformation"), then go see a doctor about his thinning hair and, while he was at it, also change his brown shoes to black to match poor Rocchi's (obviously ill-fitting) black suit. Following this Berlusconi told a hackneyed and slightly off-color joke in which an Italian male explains to a dull-witted German man how to seduce a woman. In the version told to the students in their Sunday best, Berlusconi said, "You take Champagne and dribble it here and there and then you, er, lick it off...to which the German guy asks, 'Can you do the same thing using beer?'" (This racism-tinged story seems to have originated in Belgium as a put-down by a French-speaker to his dull-witted Flemish fellow citizen.) Lastly, turning his attention to two of the young women prize-winners, Berlusconi said enthusiastically, "You're so pretty, you can come to a bunga bunga party."



There is no way of knowing the students' reactions to these pleasantries. State TV showed them laughing and enjoying the show; La7, the independent TV channel, showed other students with stony faces. In itself that is a story, but what is also intriguing is to try to unravel what may lie behind these three pranks, worthy of Batman's nemesis The Joker. One might put down the first as a way of showing that, to a man of such power and wealth, anything is permitted, including insulting his host in public; and in a leaked phone tap we hear the Premier actually saying that he is "Jesus," in the sense that he can do whatever he wants. And why not? Consider the *Corriere della Sera* report of March 9 in which Berlusconi's expenditures for the year 2010 amount to Euros 34 million (\$50 million, give or take a million), including Euros 562,000 as gifts to fourteen young ladies and a mere Euros 20,000 to the mother of [Noemi Letizia](#) [3], the Neapolitan girl whose eighteenth birthday celebration Berlusconi attended in 2009.

The second jest—showing a dumb German trumped in seduction by a suave Italian—just might reflect the fact that the German government has been in the lead in attacking the Italian position on immigration. Interior Minister [Roberto Maroni](#) [4] has called for issuing a six-month residence permit to the circa 23,000 individuals who have crossed to Italy from Tunisia since mid-January. Because most of the arrivals are not expected to remain in Italy, but go to Germany and France, the Northern European countries are calling this unfair play since it permits the migrants to travel throughout the countries who are co-signers of the Schengen Treaty. In other words, the Italian-issued permits, which would allow the bearer to travel beyond Italy, is a virtual invitation to the migrants to go elsewhere. Minister Maroni has protested against the "total refusal to cooperate" by Italy's neighbors and the European Union whereas, to quote a headline in [Der Spiegel](#) [5], "Italy Seeks to Pass Problem on to EU Partners."

The sense of the third joke, an obviously jesting invitation to the female winners of the academic awards, is much clearer. Again and again the Premier has been making public references to bunga bunga, as the parties in the wee hours of the morning in his various homes have been called. By repetition—by making the word more familiar—he removes its sting. Repetition sanitizes bunga bunga.

The same prize-giving took a turn for the serious when Berlusconi said, not for the first time, that the Italian Constitution of 1948 needs revising. Just a year ago he had proposed changing the Constitution by referendum so that he would have greater powers as head of the Council of Ministers "directly elected" by the people. This may not be necessary: in two years time a new president of Italy will be elected, and Berlusconi—scandal or not, jokes or not—remains a candidate. After the first three votes, when a two-thirds majority is required, he would need only a simple majority in Parliament. There is little reason to believe he cannot achieve this, and in fact this week Berlusconi boasted that his government will soon control 330 deputies in the 617-member lower house of Parliament.

He may well be right. Showing how the winds are blowing, on April 5 Parliament was to vote on whether or not on the night of May 27, 2010, the Premier literally believed that "Ruby Rubacuori" (the teenaged Moroccan party girl) was of age and also the niece of the now deposed Egyptian leader Mubarak. This vote was extremely important, for Milan magistrates are trying to nail Berlusconi on charges of having had sex with a minor and for abuse of his authority by intervening when the notorious Ruby was detained by police after being charged with theft. Berlusconi's defense is that the girl lied about her age and that he intervened, not for personal reasons, but for reasons of statecraft. He and/or his office phoned the Milan central police headquarters seven times that night only because he wanted to avoid an international incident with Egypt. This two-pronged defensive strategy, which depends upon Ruby's lying, has been widely mocked since it makes the Premier sound uniquely stupid, which he is not.

But never mind. Three hundred fourteen deputies voted with the Premier, who won by a comfortable twelve-vote margin, in what may be a sign of things to come.



Links

- [1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/17085aleqm5jtuuqdm-awa75ia8nrv-k7h6cw1302547129jpg>
- [2] <http://www.uniroma1.it>
- [3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silvio_Berlusconi
- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roberto_Maroni
- [5] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/>