

The Grillini About to Hop into Parliament

Judith Harris (March 08, 2013)



The famous Ides of March of ancient Rome fell on March 15, the day when the tyrannical Julius Caesar was assassinated in the building where the Senate was meeting. His assassin was Brutus, acting on behalf of a group of conspirators known as the "Liberators." By coincidence, Italy's neo-deputies and senators take their seats in Parliament and the Senate on that very day. Among them, the largest single political party - 109 members of the Chamber of Deputies (25.5%) and 50 Senators (23%) - is led by Beppe Grillo, whose weapon of choice in trying to liberate the system from itself is rhetoric.

ROME - As every high schooler knows, in the calendar of ancient Rome the Ides of March fall on the 15th of that month, and are remembered as the day when the tyrannical Julius Caesar was stabbed to death in the Senate by Brutus, on behalf of a group of conspirators known as the "Liberators." Coincidentally Italy's newly elected senators and members of parliament are to take their seats only blocks away from where the Senate was meeting in Caesar's time, and on that same day. The inspirational leader of the largest single political party about to be seated - 109 members of the



Chamber of Deputies (25.5%) and 50 Senators (23%) - is Beppe Grillo.

In his own way Grillo is a sort of Brutus, whose weapon is rhetoric in an assault on the system which he would liberate from itself. The support for Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle (5-Star Movement, or M5S) comes from the plebe - the people - and continues to rise; only weeks after the shock of his election triumph, his popularity has already surged another 3% in the polls, according to sociologist Renato Mannheimer and to a second respected polling organization, IPSOS, climbing to at least 29%. Support for Pierluigi Bersani's Partito Democratico (PD) has also surged, but by only 1%, to 27%.

Ironically, Grillo is both invisible and everywhere visible at the same time. While shunning all TV talk-show appearances, he is ever shown on TV news broadcasts, and never more so than making his October swim across the Straits to Sicily. In propaganda terms, political scientist and linguistics analyst Prof. Ferdinando Longobardi of the University of Basilicata compares Grillo's slicing through the waves to bare-chested Mussolini harvesting grain in the Twenties and to Mao Tse Tung's Yangtze River swim in 1966. "Like his body language, his rhetoric is part of Grillo's success. Language itself is politics, and both Silvio Berlusconi and Grillo strike a chord when they speak of hope," says Prof. Longobardi, speaking at a conference at American University of Rome on Friday. "People sort out the hyperbole from his real intentions."

Elsewhere too Grillo is both visible and invisible. Many observers assume he burst onto the political scene straight from the stage of the commedia dell'arte, and see his fans as participants in a Mardi Gra festival. However, as Prof. Longobardi points out, in the late 1980s Grillo was already a political activist, attacking the Socialist party of Bettino Craxi for alleged corruption and then an early environmental activist. Political scientist Gianfranco Pasquino is another who sees Grillo's serious side. "To write him off as a clown, as did the Economist magazine, is to misunderstand. Grillo is a political entrepreneur with a definite political constituency. He makes good points, and his is a legitimate protest because the political class has remained the same for too long. The country needs a systemic change and to send the old politicians home."

The massive new presence March 15 of Grillo's MPs and senators raises the question of just where they will be seated, in a Parliament hemicycle of seats running literally from left to right as a reflection of political positions. Right? left? center? No one knows. And how will they behave in that formal atmosphere where all men must wear coats and ties? Most but not all are young; the median age is 32 in the Chamber and 46 in the Senate. One out of three is a woman; among them two is a dynamic nurse whose son was also elected. For these 163, all is new; not one has previous experience in national politics simply because, when the last political elections were held in 2008, the M5S did not exist.

Many have university degrees and speak more than one language. "They're bright, educated and often unemployed or underemployed," says James Bone, London Times correspondent. Alas, not all are bright; on the popular TV program "Ballaro", neo-deputy Paolo Bernini, 25, announced that the U.S. is tucking microchips into its citizens "so as to control the population....These things are coming into the open thanks to the Internet."

Richard Hodges, president of American University of Rome, recounts that when he visited Comacchio four years ago, he found a sleepy fishing town on a lagoon near Ravenna and Ferrara that has lived on tourism since its sugar refinery was shut down in 1988. Returning there this year, he found that 53,000 new housing units had been built, but that the movers and shakers behind that burst of building had been kicked out of office and replaced by Grillini (as Grilli's followers are sometimes dismissively called; Grillo means "cricket" and so these are little crickets). The mayor and all but one of the M5S town councilmen now running the show are 30 years old or younger. "None has met Grillo, nor does this disturb them." What motivates them, they told Hodges, is solely a desire to improve their local situation. Grillo is their means to an end.

Neither Grillo himself nor his political manager and Internet guru, Gianroberto Casaleggio, sometimes described as his "shaman," will be present when the Grillini take their seats in Parliament. The master of politics cannot become a member of Parliament because of a long-ago conviction for responsibility in an auto accident that left three dead ("I'm a delinquent"). Grillo will work behind the scenes, and his movement will not move on without him. But what this will mean,



how the Grillini will perform when they face responsibility, is yet to be seen.

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