

## Good News Gazette

Judith Harris (March 09, 2012)



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ROME - There's good news from Italy, and it's about time. (Never fear: at the tail end of this piece we'll report some bad news, too.) The first bright spot is about the spread, and by this time we all know what that is. Silvio Berlusconi had weathered two years of girlie scandal and more court cases involving corruption than anyone but he cares to count. But just four months ago the spread—that is, the difference between interest rates for 10-year bonds in Germany and Italy—ballooned above 5%, and became the knockout blow to the Berlusconi government and perhaps to his political career. On March 9, for the first time in four months, the spread sank to 3% at the close of the financial day.

This was a ratification of the so-called “government of technicians” called in to sort out the Italian financial muddle, and Premier Mario Monti, backed in European finance by Mario Draghi, can only be satisfied. Those favoring the government crowed that this show of international consensus proves



that Premier Monti's government is on the right track.

Another sign of the slightly less troubled times: in a lengthy analysis of whether the problems of the European economy can weigh on U.S. elections, the authoritative economist Jacob Funk Kirkegaard of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, gave Europe the cleanest bill of health in a year. Moreover, discussing the economic problem nations he singled out, naturally, Greece and Ireland but never mentioned Italy at all, a first in a long time. (To see Kirkegaard's qualifications, [click here](#) [2]; to see his analysis, "Why President Obama can stop worrying about Europe, PIIE" [click here](#) [3])

The second Good News item is that, as a crucial prerequisite to improved export sales capacity for Italian manufactured goods, computer literacy in Italy has bounced up to almost 53% for use of a computer and almost 51% for use of the Internet, according to the official statistics-gathering agency, ISTAT. This is an improvement over the 51% and 48.9% respectively of 2010, and refers not solely to the adult population, but to the entire Italian population over age three. A territorial imbalance remains in computer use, however, with the North showing 56.9% versus the 44.6% of the South and, for the Internet, 56.3% versus 43.7% respectively. Those most computer savvy are between ages 15 and 19, predictably, but nearly 15% Italians between the ages of 65 and 74 are now linked in.

This is a major leap forward. In the not very recent past the challenge to Italy was literacy itself, for in 1960 one out of every four Italians was totally illiterate. A valiant attempt to remedy this began in 1960 with a course of instruction via TV, with teacher Alberto Manzi (1924-1997) speaking in front of a blackboard, called, "Non e' mai troppo tardi," it's never too late to learn to read. The idea was Manzi's, and at the time few owned TV sets so the lessons were broadcast in local schools in small farm towns and villages, after the men (few women attended) came in from the fields in the evening, and especially in the South of Italy. RAI historians believe that, through these lessons, 1.5 million adults were able to obtain certificates showing that they had completed elementary school. (For a history of this wonderful RAI project, [click here](#) [4])

And now, for a bit of bad news. Naturally, not everyone crowed over the drop in the spread. The secretary of Berlusconi's Liberty Party (PdL), Angelino Alfano, never showed up for a meeting scheduled with the leaders of the political parties who keep Monti in power, and so the meeting had to be cancelled. "With the reduction of the [economic] spread now we must hope that the spread among the politicians won't increase," was Monti's wry comment from Belgrade, where he was on official visit. Pierferdinando Casini was reproachful and firmly in support of Monti: "This is not the time for polemics. The spread is on its way down, and this government is proving to be fruitful. To weaken the government now is not useful. And there's no doubt that [canceling the meeting] weakens the government."

Perhaps the most irritating news item for the Bad News Gazette was another unfortunate outburst from the ever truculent Senator Umberto Bossi, still head of the Northern League. "Monti risks his life, the North will do him in." (Monti rischia la vita, il nord lo fara fuori.) At what sounded like a threat, many Italians reacted, and Bossi backed off slightly, saying that he had been "travisato" (misunderstood): "It's Monti who threatens us."

Indeed.

At the same time Bossi continued his campaign to be rid of the Italian national anthem Fratelli d'Italia, known as the Mameli Hymn. Behind this outburst was the Culture Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, which is seeking to have singing of that national anthem obligatory in schools and the institution of a national day honoring Italian unity and its Constitution, as of 2013. All Italy's political parties save the League are backing the bill—and that too is good news.



## **Links**

- [1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/20189good-news-bad-news1331323914jpg>
- [2] [http://www.iie.com/staff/author\\_bio.cfm?author\\_id=274](http://www.iie.com/staff/author_bio.cfm?author_id=274)
- [3] <http://www.piie.com/realtime/?p=2750>
- [4] [http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non\\_è\\_mai\\_troppo\\_tardi\\_\(programma\\_televisivo\)](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non_è_mai_troppo_tardi_(programma_televisivo))