

For Berlusconi, It's Social Work

Judith Harris (April 11, 2014)



Who could have guessed that, on the very day Berlusconi was given a light sentence to nine months of occasional social service work, he would be upstaged by his former right-hand man, former Senator Marcello Dell'Utri? Dell'Utri, 72, has been Silvio Berlusconi's good friend and business associate ever since he helped build Berlusconi's TV empire and then his Sicilian political organization back in 1992. But today Dell'Utri seems to have slipped away from Italian justice.



ROME - Every journalist and politician in town had been waiting to learn the judges' decision Thursday on what punishment would be meted out to Silvio Berlusconi, 77, the former premier convicted last December by Italy's highest court for tax fraud involving his TV enterprise Mediaset. Who could have guessed that, on the very day of his receiving a light sentence to nine months of occasional social service work, Berlusconi would be upstaged by his former right-hand man, the former Italian Senator Marcello Dell'Utri?

In 1982 Dell'Utri was in Milan, taking over Publitalia, which controlled Berlusconi's TV advertising. A decade later he was in Sicily, helping build Berlusconi's powerful new political organization, Forza Italia, there. Only two years later Dell'Utri came under formal investigation on charges of mediating with the Mafia. After eight judiciary proceedings against him, just one year ago a Palermo appeals court sentenced Dell'Utri to a seven-year conviction for links with the Mafia (concorso esterno). He appealed the sentence in Italy's high Cassations Court in Rome, which is expected to deliver a verdict this coming week. However, suspecting he might flee the country before that definitive decision, Palermo prosecutors ordered his arrest. Unable to locate him, they suspect that he has fled the country, as he had once before during another trial.

In addition, Dell'Utri is reportedly implicated in the theft of rare books from the historic Biblioteca dei Girolamini, in Naples, whose 150,000-volume collection dates from the Middle Ages. Security camera footage shows its director, Marino Massimo De Caro, leaving the building with an armload of books. In January of 2012, De Caro was arrested for stealing at least 1,500 books, including one by Galileo Galilei. Many but not all have been returned, including by Christie's and an auction house in Germany, which had 30 volumes. De Caro is now in prison and facing trial.

Meantime the Neapolitan investigation led to Dell'Utri, who confirmed to prosecutors that he had received from De Caro "gifts" of rare books, which he agreed to return. However, Dell'Utri then admitted that he had "misplaced" one of these gifts, a copy of Thomas Moore's 1516 Utopia. He then admitted that he'd also "purchased something." No less an authority than the New York Times has alleged that "without Dell'Utri's support" the appointment of director De Caro (under culture Minister Giancarlo Galan in the Berlusconi government) - who had no college degree or other qualification for the job - would not have been possible. By the way, Dell'Utri's son is in a 50% partnership with De Caro, in an energy company.

For Berlusconi, the question for months has been whether presiding judge Pasquale Nobile De Santis would put Berlusconi under house arrest or consigned on a trial basis ("affidamento in prova") into the hands of a social worker for a half day every week for the next nine months. Berlusconi particularly rejected the idea of house arrest because it would not allow him to join in the campaign for the May 25 European elections. In the walkup to Thursday's court decision against house arrest, Berlusconi had been briefly hospitalized in Milan for knee trouble which has obliged him to walk on crutches and may require surgery. His happy ending came about, said the court, on grounds of his age; that his is a "fiscal crime"; and that he has repaid the tax collectors.

But not all has gone smoothly. In awarding him some form of collaboration with the social services, the court stipulated that it would be initially on a trial basis, and that if he continues to insult the judges--Berlusconi has accused them of having a "mafia of judges"--, he will be put under house arrest. In addition, in another move aimed at maintaining his active political presence, his reborn Forza Italia party made a formal appeal to the European Court of Justice seeking for Berlusconi to be allowed as a candidate for the May 25 elections to the EU parliament because otherwise "the voters' right" to elect him is harmed. The EU has just rejected that.



Berlusconi accuses Premier Matteo Renzi of being unhelpful to him on this crucial issue (which implies that such personal help was part of their January private agreement on election law reform). This resentment surfaced in a conversation over an inadvertently open microphone. The speakers were Berlusconi's youthful new "advisor," former Mediaset TV talk show host Giovanni Toti, and another super-loyalist, Berlusconi's former education minister, Mariastella Gelmini, who is currently coordinator for the Lombardy's FI party. The video of their clearly overheard conversation has been a smash hit on YouTube and non-Berlusconi TV networks.

Said Toti at one point, "He [Berlusconi] doesn't know what to do about Renzi."

Gelmini: "Oh, I know."

Toti: "Because he understood that this mortal embrace is ruining us, but he doesn't know how to get out of it. Then he's anguished about the 10th [April 10, the court's deadline]."

Gelmini: "Oh, certainly."

Toti: "A guy from La Stampa [daily] of Turin said that they [the judges] won't give him a damn thing, not even social workers. They'll just say, go home, stay there, and don't break our balls."

But never mind--"Nothing to be embarrassed about," Gelmini said later. "This is no big secret." Toti too took the event in his stride and on Wednesday was complaining that Berlusconi was concerned that Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD) party was actually blocking the reforms the country needs.

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