



Discussion

Berlusconi: the politically incorrect politician

Geoff Andrews

Welcome to the Open University Open Politics Podcast on Silvio Berlusconi and modern political leadership.

I'm Geoff Andrews and I'm joined by Bill Emmott, a writer on International Affairs, and Francesco Grillo, Director of the Italian Think Tank Vision.

Bill, Silvio Berlusconi's been described as a post-modern populist, that is someone able to evoke the sentiments of ordinary people, appeal if you like, to their gut instincts, but in a modern and global and virtual world. Is that a fair description?

Bill Emmott

I think it's a good description. I think that you need to add a few things, such as his command of television, not just as a, as a performer on television, but as an owner of television, and his ability therefore, to manage his image and his message in a way much more powerful than that of his opponents. Second, as a business man, who therefore has influence over other businesses, because of his wealth and because of his control of advertising. So he's a post-modern populist but with quite a few other advantages.

Geoff Andrews Francesco, is Berlusconi a post-modern populist?

Francesco Grillo

Yeah, I think so. It depends on what we mean about post-modern. But certainly he's beyond the politically correct and the mainstream politics that we have witnesses for some years.

Geoff Andrews Is the story of Silvio Berlusconi a peculiarly Italian phenomenon? Some people might compare him to, you know, Sarah Palin in the US, Vladimir Putin, Jacob Zuma even in South Africa, what would you say to that?

Bill Emmott

The whole package of Berlusconi is an Italian phenomenon. But elements of him respond to phenomena that are, or trends that are there worldwide. Particularly information overload in a world of television and Internet.

Second, I think, a certain disconnect of ordinary people from mainstream politicians, old ways of talking, old party structures which no longer seem to have any validity for people.

Geoff Andrews It's quite a different image when you think in Britain, you see David Cameron and Clegg, you know, trying to present themselves as, as very serious statesmen. Then you look at Berlusconi and he presents himself more as a salesman than a statesman. Is this a different kind of political leadership we're seeing that is, you know, gonna threaten the old Liberal Democratic norms?

Bill Emmott

I actually don't think it will. I think that this, ah, anti-politics style that he tries to put on is not ultimately convincing in, in most situations. I think that in Italy, because the opposition is so weak and because traditional politicians are held in such low esteem, and because he's so successful with his coalition he can get away with it.

Geoff Andrews He's not even accountable to his own party membership because Forza Italia is a very unusual political organisation. He doesn't seem to have an ideology. He doesn't seem to be a typical Western politician.

Bill Emmott

I think that the good thing about Berlusconi, from a critic's point of view, is that he has no ideology. But that is also a mystery about him. What is it that rallies people around him? It's a basic approach; it's his money and his power; he is a success and people rally to a success in order to use it for their own purposes. And that is the sort of movement that he has created. It's not really a political party, it's a, it's a personal movement.

Geoff Andrews He often presents himself as a kind of victim, which is very strange when you think, you know, the amount of power that he holds.

Francesco Grillo

Well, certainly he plays with the sympathy of the Italians that are not comfortable with the quantity of the regulation that we have, and therefore they also believe that they're victims of the system.

The Italian institution system very much needs a radical form. This applies also to the way justice is run. And he plays on this sentiment which is rather widespread and incapability of the opposition to present proposal that are serious and appealing.

Geoff Andrews Why do you think the opposition Italy's been so weak and timid? Is it because Berlusconi has presented them as the typical boring politicians?

Bill Emmott

I think that the Left in Italy is, has been weak because all of its leaders really, who are leaders in their 60s and 70s, continue to operate in the way of Italian politics of the 1970s and 1980s of running personal power fiefs, channelling money to themselves and to their supporters without any real ideological or philosophical goal. They have failed to learn how politics has changed, partly because they got away with it.

Francesco Grillo

If I can elaborate on what Bill was just saying ... the weakness of opposition mainly means the weakness of their capability to read what, what Italian society, what society in general has become. They still act, they still talk like Italian society is a society made of people with long term employment contract.

Therefore, they still behave like Italian society has got a big, highly inflexible Labour market, which is not the case. Because 90 percent of the inflow in the Labour market is true short term contract, which means an elaboration of a completely different intellectual and ideological platform.

Geoff Andrews

Should we be worried by the lack of accountability, the lack of transparency in the nature of political leadership that Berlusconi represents? Does his populism have some cost for democracy?

Francesco Grillo

I think this is the real problem, the lack of accountabilities is not something that Berlusconi invented. Lack of accountability is almost intrinsically part of the democratic game nowadays, not only in Italy, we have to sort of reinvent accountability in democracy.

Geoff Andrews Do you think Silvio Berlusconi is response to a wider crisis of democracy in Europe?

Francesco Grillo

Absolutely. It's a general crisis of democracy, I would say a crisis of the structure of the mechanism of mainly representative democracy which is felt in, even here. So I'm talking about a crisis that is still not elaborated of things like having a general election every four years. In an information society it doesn't make sense to have such a way to consult people every four years on all the issues in one shot.

Geoff Andrews So what people talk about as a crisis of representation, the breakdown in the relationship between politicians and the electorate, this has led to many responses and Berlusconi is one of these responses... trying to evoke, you know, the people who've been betrayed by the system, is that how you see it?

Francesco Grillo

It's an answer in the sense that basically Berlusconi says since democracy's not working, you better relax, stay on the couch, watch television while I am solving the problems on your behalf. It's an answer which is the opposite of what I think Obama is sort of saying. The main message of Obama is: We can change together.

Bill Emmott

I think that the old structure of democracy, political parties based on class and ideology or in some cases religious affiliation, representation, which is essentially unresponsive to the people except through an election every four or five years, is now being challenged. What's already happening in politics is that the new cycle, a sense of awareness of public opinion moves on a 24 hour basis for politicians. The desire to manage the news, to respond to opinion is there, and I think eventually the way we do politics, not just in news management terms but in elections and in the formation of policy will have to respond in some way. Elections once every four years, an all or nothing choice probably is outdated.

Geoff Andrews

Bill thanks very much and thanks Francesco.

Liza Pulman

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