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Silvio Berlusconi's Virtue

The only people in Italian politics who are worse than the prime minister are. . . everyone else.

BY RACHEL MARSDEN

When Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi won a confidence vote last week by a mere three votes, it proved that in politics you don't have to be perfect, you just have to be better than the other guy. And in Italy right now, that's a pretty low bar.

For all the opposition's whining about Mr. Berlusconi's business interests, ministerial resignations, (self-made) wealth, off-color remarks, and forcing Italians to cinch their belts with new austerity measures to better reflect the world in which we now all live post-crisis, he still has a popularity rating in the mid-to-upper 30s—which still beats that of any of his rivals. Mr. Berlusconi could likely win a general election right now with his hands tied behind his back and a couple of pretty young things in his lap.

How could this even be possible? How could the people of Italy not be wooed by the opposition's vision for their country? Maybe it's because that vision doesn't extend much beyond "Let's All Dump On Silvio," and variations thereof.

Mr. Berlusconi was elected to his position just two years ago, but he now routinely faces, and wins, confidence votes every few months. These votes tend to serve not only as a test of confidence in Mr. Berlusconi, but also a test of overconfidence by the opposition. The first in the latest series occurred earlier this year when a budget was unveiled featuring 25 billion in spending cuts over two years, including public sector wage freezes. The legislation, in the interest of fairness, also sought to cut back on public sector perks for the rich, such as tax evasion.

Last week's new confidence test occurred in the wake of this budget's final parliamentary approval—about which no one except the usual rent-a-rioter crowds in the streets are com-

plaining. Mr. Berlusconi's opponents in parliament, limited to the tossing of mere verbal bombs, acknowledged that while the budget cuts are a necessary reality that must be approved if Italy is not to go the way of Greece, it would still be nice if Mr. Berlusconi would step down shortly thereafter.

But unless the various opposition parties are able to find an actual issue or reform on which they profoundly disagree with Mr. Berlusconi, and so can mount a campaign on an issue more substantive than the prime minister's peccadilloes, then they're just wasting everyone's time—including their own.

Mr. Berlusconi's reforms may be either unnecessarily harsh or disappointingly tepid, depending on who you ask. He may seem shallow, his personal life a distraction. But, really, a distraction from what? It's not as if Italian politics is, beyond Mr. Berlusconi himself, consumed with intense debates of great seriousness about the sustainability of the welfare state or how to achieve economic growth in the future.

Indeed, the only people in Italian politics who are worse than the prime minister, at the moment, are everyone else. Take onetime Berlusconi ally Gianfranco Fini, whom Mr. Berlusconi left inside the party tent long enough for him to flood it with criticism and opposition. Mr. Berlusconi finally freed Mr. Fini to quit the party and join one he'd feel more comfortable with: one of his very own making. A start-up, if you will.

Mr. Fini appears to have made his new party's first priority and main platform tormenting Silvio Berlusconi. This dissension has sparked repeated confidence votes and threats since the summer. Mr. Fini may believe that he'd be a better leader than Mr. Berlusconi, or that someone else would be. But so far, he hasn't gotten around to explaining why, or how a government run by Mr.

Fini would do better by the average Italian than the current one. He seems content to hold Mr. Berlusconi's government hostage to the threat of defection rather than take the risk of putting the question to the voters.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the socialist left hasn't done much better. They no doubt realize that the traditional left-wing approach of doling out favors to their constituents isn't viable under current budgetary constraints.

In other words, the real story of Italian politics at the moment is not Mr. Berlusconi's remarkable staying power, but the flaccidity of the alternatives.

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