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LETTER FROM ROME

GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS!

The P.M.'s sex-follies.

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

Silvio Berlusconi, the seventy-two-year-old Italian Prime Minister, is no stranger to scandal. Having survived some seventeen criminal trials without ultimately being convicted, he has injured the Italian public to feelings of shock or indignation. Last January, the prosecutor's office in Naples indicted Berlusconi and issued a report containing extracts of more than a thousand wiretapped conversations depicting Italy's state TV network, RAI, as a casting couch that Berlusconi used to grant favors to aspiring actresses—he called them “*le fanciulle mie*” (“my girls”)—and to try to bring down the government. The report had no impact. In the national elections in the spring, Berlusconi returned triumphantly to power with his center-right People of Liberty coalition after less than two years in the opposition. But in early summer, when the Naples prosecutors indicated that there were hundreds of other wiretaps as well, of a purely personal nature, which they requested be destroyed, Italy's political-journalistic gossip mill began churning. Forget abuse of power and possible criminal wrongdoing—bring on the sex! Press reports speculated that the tapes contained raunchy comments involving Berlusconi and three female members of his government. The rumors about the Prime Minister's supposed shenanigans are often colored by political affiliation: Berlusconi's critics favor the stories about a doddering septuagenarian addicted to penis pumps and mysterious injections; supporters like to paint him as a tireless Don Juan, capable of satisfying two or three women at once.

During the election campaign, Berlusconi helped fuel speculation by bragging about how much more beautiful his party's female candidates for parliament were than those of his center-left opponents. Referring to Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the Chamber of Deputies and his principal coalition partner, he said of their

decision to make thirty per cent of their candidates women, “There is already a rush to examine the past and say they're all my and Gianfranco's girlfriends.” He went on, “We are kind of supermen in this way, let's be clear, but even we have our limits.” In any case, Berlusconi has installed in the parliament, and even in his government, a number of former starlets who gained fame in his TV empire.

Antonio Di Pietro, a former prosecutor who heads one of the main opposition parties, publicly called Berlusconi *un magnaccia*, a colorful term for pimp, because of the time he has spent finding work for “showgirls” rather than solving government problems. At a protest in Rome this summer, the popular Italian comedian Sabina Guzzanti said of one Berlusconi appointee, Mara Carfagna, a former Miss Italy contestant who worked as a showgirl on Berlusconi's TV stations before entering parliament, “You can't make someone Minister of Equal Opportunity just because she's sucked your cock!” (Carfagna is suing Guzzanti for defamation and has steadfastly denied any sexual relationship with Berlusconi.) Vittorio Feltri, the editor of the right-wing newspaper *Libero*, took the opposite view. “I wouldn't worry if I were Berlusconi,” he said. “Mussolini also had his women. We need a Prime Minister, not a Trappist monk.”

Berlusconi talks openly about sex and does little to hide the fact that he has had a face-lift and hair transplants. In his politics, he combines archaic forms of sovereignty with modern elements of media charisma. The Milan daily *Corriere della Sera* recently quoted him half-complaining and half-boasting about being treated like a king whose royal touch is thought to have healing powers. “Pregnant mothers ask me to put a hand on their stomachs, others on their eyes because they have trouble seeing,” Berlusconi said. “Some, imagine, on their heads because they're going bald. But in that case all I



"We need a Prime Minister, not a Typpist monk," a right-wing editor commented, in support of Berlusconi.

have to do is give them the phone number of my doctor."

In addition to various women whose favors he is rumored to have enjoyed, Berlusconi has brought to the new parliament three of his criminal-defense attorneys (who devise legislation that may help their client); his tax consultant; several co-defendants in various corruption cases; a long list of former and current executives in his many companies; columnists and editors of his many newspapers; and his personal physician.

As a result, the seat of the Chamber of Deputies, partly designed by Bernini, with its beautiful marble floors and soaring ceilings, has become the new Via Veneto. The center of its social life is a long, handsome room known as the *transatlantico*, the ocean liner, where members of parliament sit on comfortable leather couches and chairs or stand around and chat with colleagues and journalists.

On one of the days I happened to visit, someone whispered, "Ecco la Carfagna!" as the much maligned Minister of Equal Opportunity moved through

the crowd. Carfagna has undergone a major makeover since her days on television, when she favored short skirts and décolleté blouses. One of the more popular online videos in Italy this summer was called "They've seen my ass even in Germany," which featured Carfagna as a showgirl being twirled in the air during a dance routine, her skirt flying up to her waist. (At a large gala last year, Berlusconi remarked to Carfagna, "If I weren't already married, I'd marry you!" The result was a highly publicized spat with his wife, Veronica Lario.) Now Carfagna has a short, severe (but very fashionable) haircut and wears a sober gray business suit, but she is only thirty-two, and her large brown eyes make her appear even younger. She was trailed closely by an aide who kept journalists at bay. Discussing gossip, Carfagna has said, "is not part of the mandate of my ministry."

Decidedly less sober is the Under-Secretary of Tourism, Michela Vittoria Brambilla, another former Miss Italy contestant, who once hosted a TV program called "Mysteries of the Night,"

which focussed on the night life of cities around the world. (A popular YouTube video depicts her visiting a Barcelona S&M club featuring men on leather leashes, bare-breasted women, and rub-downs with exotic fruits.) Brambilla also worked as a television reporter, and went on to become the managing director of her family's steel business. The tourism post is said to have been her second choice; because of her love of animals, she reportedly wanted to become Minister of the Environment. She still has television looks, from her long red hair, low-cut blouse, and micro-miniskirt down to her "slave sandals," with four-inch heels and an elaborate web of leather ties that climb suggestively up her legs.

The Minister of Education, Mariastella Gelmini, now thirty-five, is staid by comparison. Gelmini not only has no past in show business; she actually has significant, if brief, experience in politics. She is trying to work out a plan to give more local control to schools. (Both Brambilla and Gelmini also deny any claims of impropriety.)

Between votes, Nicolò Ghedini, one

GERALD SCARFE

of Berlusconi's criminal-defense attorneys, likes to hang out at the *transatlantico* bar, eating cherries. For the past several years, he has shuttled between the Milan courtroom where Berlusconi has been tried on a series of corruption charges and the parliament, where he has helped write a series of laws that have kept Berlusconi and some of his closest associates out of prison. When I spoke with him, he explained calmly and patiently why it was appropriate for the new parliament to pass a law that allowed Berlusconi's broadcasting empire, Mediaset, to keep a television-channel frequency that by Italian law and European Union rules had been assigned to someone else. (Restrictions on television ownership don't make sense in an age of digital television, he argued.) He also told me why it was necessary to pass a law exempting Berlusconi from any criminal prosecution while he is Prime Minister. (Italy's judiciary is entirely autonomous; therefore, he reasoned, it is crucial to have greater defenses for the executive.) The law has short-circuited a case that was about to be decided in which Berlusconi was accused of paying off his British lawyer to give false testimony in two trials, including one about Berlusconi's role in establishing a secret offshore bank account belonging to Fininvest, Berlusconi's holding company, to finance the Socialist leader Bettino Craxi. (Both

men deny the charges.) More recently, Berlusconi has pushed a bill to restrict the use of wiretaps in all prosecutions not involving terrorism or the Mafia, and to jail for up to three years journalists who publish leaked wiretaps.

It's difficult not to be charmed by Deputy Umberto Scapagnini, Berlusconi's personal physician, whose theories of longevity drew him into Berlusconi's circle. He keeps the Prime Minister on a special regimen of diet, exercise, amino acids, vitamins, and antioxidants. "Berlusconi is the most extraordinary psychophysical subject I have ever examined," Scapagnini told me. "And I am not saying this because I'm a brownnoser. I am an internationally respected scientist—I don't need to curry favor." Scapagnini, who has travelled the Silk Road and studied the dietary habits of the residents of Okinawa looking for the secrets of long life, has helped develop a method for measuring what he calls a person's true biological age (the measurement of certain hormones and an examination of fifty strands of DNA as well as the person's immune system), which can vary considerably from one's actual age. "Berlusconi is fifteen years younger than his chronological age," Scapagnini continued. "He has an amazing immune system and powers of resistance. He has a magnetic personality and an exceptional ca-

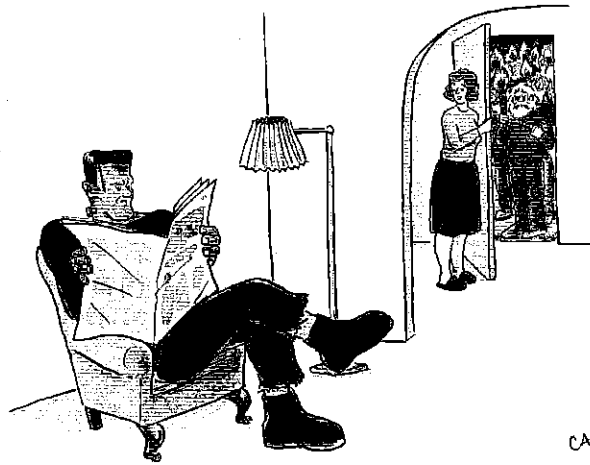
capacity to communicate. He is perhaps the patient I've examined who has the capacity to live the longest. If you see him in a bathing suit, he has the musculature and tone of a much, much younger man." Scapagnini hopes to keep the P.M. alive until the age of a hundred and twenty, which he considers within the natural life span of a human being.

As for women, Scapagnini said, "Certainly, he has a strong sexual personality, and they are highly attracted to him. Naturally, for his part, as with any of us, this is not unpleasant. But, as with everything having to do with Berlusconi, it quickly turned to legend, and he has been the object of a disgraceful violation of privacy that would never be permitted in the United States."

Sex has always played a considerable role in Berlusconi's carefully cultivated image. He began his career in Milan real estate, constructing apartment complexes and bringing an American-style gated community to the area, and then became a pioneer in private television, helping break down the state monopoly in broadcasting. With the help of much political backing, he established a virtual monopoly on private TV in Italy: since the early nineteen-eighties, he has been the principal owner of the three largest private channels, which, together with the three state TV channels, account for more than ninety per cent of the market.

In speeches to his sales force, Berlusconi used to boast about how, early in his career in real estate, he helped close a crucial deal by seducing someone's secretary. Berlusconi, in fact, introduced sex into Italian television, and changed a national culture. For most of the post-Second World War period, Italy was dominated by the Catholic Church (together with the Christian Democratic Party) and the Italian Communist Party, all of which were rather prudish. Not only did Berlusconi broadcast "Dallas" and "Dynasty"; he introduced a program called "Colpo Grosso," a mystifying game-show striptease that invariably ended with the contestants—a man and a woman—in their underwear, the woman topless.

Berlusconi didn't mind using his TV contacts to advance his standing in the political world. We get a taste of this from a wiretap made in 1986, after Bettino Craxi had become Prime Minister



"It's for you."

CAS



and had helped Berlusconi acquire his virtual monopoly on private television in Italy. At the time, police tapped a phone call between Berlusconi and one of his closest advisers, Marcello Dell'Utri, who was suspected of laundering money for the Sicilian Mafia. (He was convicted of conspiring with the Mafia in 2004, and is appealing the conviction.) On December 31, 1986, Dell'Utri and Berlusconi exchanged New Year's greetings, and the topic turned to sex:

BERLUSCONI: The New Year is off to a bad start!

DELL'UTRI: Why? BERLUSCONI: Because two girls from "Drive In" [a Fininvest TV show] were supposed to come and they stood us up! And Craxi is out of his mind with anger!

DELL'UTRI: What do you care about "Drive In"?

BERLUSCONI: What do I care? It means we're not going to fuck! If the year starts like this, it means we won't fuck anymore!

For all its froth, the latest gossip-fest originated in a serious criminal investigation. Prosecutors in Naples were investigating Agostino Saccà, the former head of the drama division of RAI, and

his relations with Berlusconi. The prosecutors contend that Saccà abused his position by doing favors for Berlusconi in exchange for help in setting up a private film-production company in Calabria, a project that he was trying to get under way while still on the public payroll. "I'll return the favor when you are in business on your own," Berlusconi had reportedly told Saccà. This is what many feared when Berlusconi entered politics: that he would use his vast power as the country's richest man to distort the function of government—to, in effect, bribe a public servant into serving Berlusconi instead of the public.

Several wiretaps of the investigations were obtained by the news magazine *L'Espresso* and put up on its Web site. Recorded in 2007, when Berlusconi was out of power, they are a study in sycophancy:

SACCÀ: President! Good evening, Presidente. . . . How are you?

BERLUSCONI: Getting by. . . .

SACCÀ: No. . . . Getting by in grand form, I must say, even with so many difficulties. . . . You remain the most beloved figure in the country. . . .

BERLUSCONI: Politically, I'm nowhere . . . but socially they mistake me for the Pope. . . .

SACCÀ: That's just my point, you are the most beloved in the country, I say this without any intent to flatter. . . . but it's stupendous, because there's a need for. . . . there's a void. . . . that you fill emotionally for the people. . . . We feel it.

Then they turn to the business of the call. Berlusconi wants help in maintaining the center-right's control of RAI, even though the center-left is running the government.

SACCÀ: You are the only one who has never asked me for anything. . . .

BERLUSCONI: Except from time to time about women. . . . to boost the boss's morale.

Then Berlusconi moves on to a new point: he wants two actresses hired, one of them for an explicitly political purpose. Saccà, like any good dispenser of patronage, doesn't want to know why:

BERLUSCONI: Let me explain this thing. . . .

SACCÀ: No, Presidente, you don't have to explain anything.

BERLUSCONI: No, I'll explain it: I am trying to get. . . .

SACCÀ: Presidente, you are a very civil, correct person. . . .

BERLUSCONI: I am trying to get. . . . the majority in the Senate. . . . and this Evelina Manna could be. . . . because she's been recommended by someone with whom I'm negotiating.

In this period, Berlusconi was trying to overturn the center-left government of Romano Prodi, which was sustained by a one-vote majority in the Senate. One senator claims that he was offered a substantial sum of money by a supporter of the center-right to switch sides, and in this phone call Berlusconi makes it quite clear that he is hoping to get a part for an actress on behalf of another center-left senator, in order to bring down the government. (Saccà and Berlusconi deny that they did anything improper, and Saccà says that the two actresses mentioned in the conversation were merely auditioned, not hired. Saccà remains under investigation, and his lawyers have moved to have the case dismissed.)

Another set of wiretaps suggests the degree to which Berlusconi controlled RAI while out of office, despite being the principal owner of its main competitor, Mediaset. RAI hired Deborah Bergamini, Berlusconi's former personal assistant, to be the director of marketing. In 2007, it was reported that Bergamini was functioning essentially as a kind of Media set agent inside the state TV system. She

was frequently on the phone with her former colleagues at Mediaset, coordinating programs and discussing how news events should be handled. In one 2005 conversation, she discussed how to minimize coverage of the death of the Pope, in order not to depress the Catholic vote in regional elections that were about to take place. When the election went badly for Berlusconi's center-right coalition, Bergamini and her colleagues worked mightily to delay broadcasting the results as long as possible, until the audience dropped off, and then made the announcement in as confusing a fashion as possible. Bergamini was let go from RAI after the conversations became public, but was given nearly six hundred thousand dollars in severance. (She denies any collusion with Mediaset.) Today, she, too, sits in parliament.

Before leaving office in 2006, Berlusconi passed a new electoral law that gave party leaders almost total power over who could run for parliament. In the past, voters could vote for individual candidates, giving power to local politicians with a following in their home districts. Under the new rules, Italians can vote only for a party, and the party bosses draw up the electoral lists. Those at the top of the list have the greatest chance of getting elected, and candidates' chances diminish the farther down they are placed. Members of parliament serve at the pleasure of the party leader. "I'm like Prince Charming—they were pumpkins and I turned them into parliamentarians," Berlusconi once said of his parliamentary delegation. The law also contained a "prize" for the party winning a majority in parliament: a number of extra seats to provide security for the governing coalition.

During a recent legislative session, Berlusconi proposed that only the party leaders should bother to vote in parliament, making the role of all but a handful of the six hundred and thirty members purely ceremonial. "We are moving toward a kind of South American model of democracy," Bruno Tabacchi, who is a former Christian Democrat, a member of the Old Guard, and hardly a political radical, says. Now in the opposition, he served in Berlusconi's center-right coalition between 2001 and

2006. Even then, he points out, he voted against criminal-justice laws that appeared designed specifically to benefit Berlusconi and his co-defendants. Such internal dissent under the new rules is inconceivable, Tabacchi says. "Members of parliament are essentially appointed, not elected, now. The role of parliament has become moribund." Gerardo D'Ambrosio, a center-left senator who spent more than forty years as a judge before entering politics, was even blunter. Because of Berlusconi's habit of cutting off debate on important legislation by calling for simple votes of confidence, "Parliament has become a farce," he said.

How farcical became clear early in the new session, when a photographer with a telephoto lens captured the text of a note that Berlusconi sent to two young female deputies, Gabriella Giammanco and Nunzia De Girolamo, on the Chamber floor:

Gabri, Nunzia, you look great together! Thanks for staying here, but it's not necessary. If you have some romantic appointment at lunchtime, I authorize you to leave!... Many kisses to both of you!!! "Your" president.

The photographer also captured the beginning of their response:

Dear [President], we accept romantic appointments only from you.

Five years ago, Berlusconi saw a pretty twenty-three-year-old TV news reader named Virginia Sanjust di Teulada deliver a report about one of his economic decrees. The next day, he sent her a lavish bouquet of flowers with a note of congratulations. She replied with a thank-you note that included her cell-phone number. The next thing she knew, the Prime Minister was on the line, inviting her to lunch at the ministerial palace. She accepted. After lunch, according to an account by her ex-husband, Federico Armati, Berlusconi allegedly gave her a diamond bracelet and offered her a two-and-a-half-month consultancy at the Prime Minister's office, which paid about fifty thousand dollars. This was done with a formal ministerial decree, which was withdrawn suddenly when the press heard about it. But Sanjust subsequently got her own TV show on RAI



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