

Silvio, it's Time to Go

Italy can no longer afford the antics of its playboy in chief.

By **Christopher Dickey** | NEWSWEEK

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Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's record of intimidating and outfoxing his enemies, rewriting laws to suit himself, and generally leading his public as well as private life *in flagrante delicto* puts him in a particularly Italian pantheon. One thinks of Nero, or the Borgias, of bread and circuses, debauchery and corruption. Never mind that this is 2009; consider just a few of the scandals that have rocked Berlusconi's throne in the past few months. There was the allegation by his estranged wife that he was flirting with underage girls; the sleazy sex tapes made by a call girl who said she serviced Il Cavaliere, as he's called, and that he offered her a seat in the European Parliament; and the allegations of an influence peddler and cocaine dealer that he'd furnished hookers for Berlusconi's parties in Rome. All that on top of paparazzi photos taken at the prime minister's villa in Sardinia that showed at least one distinguished guest cavorting like a priapic satyr.

Then, last week, the besieged media mogul turned politician got hit with a pair of devastating court rulings. One declared him partially responsible for a corruption case in which a judge was bribed in a corporate battle during the early 1990s, and ordered Berlusconi's holding company to pay €750 million (\$1.1 billion) in damages. The other ruling, by the Constitutional Court, threw out a law that gave the prime minister immunity from criminal prosecution, thus potentially exposing him to further trials for bribe paying and investigations of ties to organized crime.

The prime minister maintains his innocence about all the allegations, sleazy or otherwise. He is appealing the damage judgment and has criticized the Constitutional Court. He claims to be a victim of a witch hunt led by left-wingers, communists, and foreign business interests. You might think all the trouble would be enough to make this 73-year-old former cruise-ship crooner and self-made billionaire decide to start winding up his political career. But you'd be wrong. Berlusconi plans to hold on—and he just might succeed. His approval rating is 63 percent in recent polls, his left-wing opponents are in complete disarray, and his would-be successors on the right are still jockeying for position. If Berlusconi uses the court's new ruling to force elections, he may even manage to strengthen his parliamentary majority.

Just because he *can* stay in power doesn't mean he *should*, however. It's high time for Italy to draw the line. It's neither conspiratorial nor condescending to say, Silvio, it's time to go. It's just common sense.

In the United States there's a saying: "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." Berlusconi has never been a

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tippler, but it's obvious with every passing day that he's drunk on power and drunk on himself—and that if he stays at Italy's wheel, he's likely not only to wreck the country but also to damage Europe and possibly even the North Atlantic alliance. These are perilous times for Rome, with dangerous roads to navigate from Wall Street to Afghanistan. Italy faces pressing problems. Yet instead of focusing on what's in front of him, the scandal-racked Berlusconi now has his eyes firmly fixed on the rearview mirror, looking for the prosecutors, press, communist conspirators, and scheming competitors—not to mention angry women—out to get him.

There was a time when Berlusconi saw himself as the savior of his country, and could actually make a plausible case. In the early 1990s, his choice to enter politics may have been selfish in part. It's often alleged he worried that his vast media empire would fall prey to corruption inquiries if he did not find a way to put himself or someone very close to him in power. Many of his business moves had been facilitated by politicians who were under indictment. But Berlusconi also played a valuable role at that moment in Italian politics. The country's political class had been decimated by the "clean hands" corruption investigations, leaving a void at the center-right that Berlusconi managed neatly to step into and fill. "Moderate voters no longer had anyone to vote for," he told NEWSWEEK in 2006. "I know that cemeteries are filled with 'indispensable' people. But at that time I think there was no other possibility for my country" to emerge from the political crisis. He wanted, he said, to give centrist voters "dignity in terms of their past, and hope for their future."

Berlusconi the businessman became the quintessential antipolitician. His mistrust of government and dislike of taxes played well among small-business owners, who are the driving force of the Italian economy. He also spoke for many in the working class who felt threatened by immigrants moving into their neighborhoods and competing for their jobs. The Italian left, meanwhile, had grown ossified, vilifying authority and clinging to idealistic notions of social justice that the rest of Italian society had left behind. If anyone could move Italy into the 21st century, *Il Cavaliere* seemed to be the one.

In this sense, Berlusconi's greatest crime is not legally actionable. It's that he never delivered on this early promise. Instead, like a late Roman emperor, he has pandered to society's weaknesses, indulged extravagance, and encouraged irresponsibility at almost all levels. If he were the father of his country, he'd be feeding his children pure sugar. Nobody likes to pay taxes. But rare is the politician who would actually say, "We must fight against tax evasion but also defend the rights of tax evaders, or companies that make mistakes," as he did in 2006. Even though Berlusconi claims that his popularity stems from the way he reflects what Italians want, he has done everything he can to make Italians a reflection of himself.

The prime minister's demeaning attitude toward women, for example, is for him as much a political device as a personal vice. "I think Italians recognize themselves in me," he recently told a youth rally. "I am one of them. I was poor. I am interested in the things that interest them. I love football. I smile. I love others and, above all else, beautiful women." A documentary shown at the Venice Film Festival last month, *Videocracy*, records in painfully funny—and then just painful—detail the way Berlusconi played on prurience to build his private TV empire in the 1980s. A symbol of those years was a game show where sexy housewives stripped off a piece of clothing every time a contestant gave the right answer to a question. With each apron, rubber glove, or hair scarf that fell to the floor, Berlusconi reinforced an image that would help marginalize Italian women for decades to come. Today on his networks—and, to some extent, even on the state-controlled channels he dominates—the housewives have been replaced by ever-younger women wearing sequined pasties, garter belts, and rubber thongs, who writhe around older men in tableaux reminiscent of King Neptune surrounded by mermaids—or, indeed, of Prime Minister Berlusconi at one of his parties.

Il Cavaliere's faithful supporters buy into that image to such an extent that at a recent convention of his

Popolo della Libertà party in Milan, even women delegates rushed to his defense, claiming the stories about his philandering were either idle gossip, fabrications by his enemies, or validations of his masculinity. "If he has so many women," said housewife Carmela Mamone, "this means he's a real man."

What's missing amid this spectacle is the political will to do anything but survive. And Italy simply can't afford such narrow egocentricity. It now has the oldest population in Europe and the second oldest in the world, after Japan. Immigrants who replenish the labor force are exploited and reviled. The cost of pensions is eating up the national budget. The country's commercial infrastructure is doddering along as well, crippling chances for economic growth. Until the start of the 1990s, Italy was one of Europe's best-performing countries; ever since, it's been one of the worst, and the IMF now expects Italy's GDP to drop by 5.1 percent this year, far more than the euro zone as a whole. Public education is an embarrassment. (As a recent report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development pointed out, the only OECD countries where children get worse schooling are Mexico and Turkey.) Development depends on the rule of law, but Italy's mafias still rank among its biggest businesses, raking in an estimated €130 billion a year.

Berlusconi's policy failures are everywhere. His attempts to improve education have amounted to little more than cost cutting. He's done almost nothing to tackle welfare reform. And despite his rhetoric on taxes—during the last general campaign he promised to lower rates—the government now predicts they will rise this year. During an earlier stint of his as prime minister, Berlusconi's police did help bring down one of Sicily's last powerful godfathers, Bernardo Pro-ven-za-no. But prosecutors in Sicily have so often tried to tie Berlusconi himself to the mob, although they've never made the charges stick, that this undermines his accomplishments.

Internationally, Berlusconi's personal demeanor and scandalous reputation are not just cringe-inducing—they are directly harming Italy's interests. Having caused an uproar soon after President Barack Obama's election by remarking on the first African-American president's "suntan," Berlusconi thought he'd try out the joke again after coming back from the G20 meeting in Pittsburgh last month. He brought greetings from the U.S.A., he told conservative supporters. "What's his name? Some tanned guy. Ah, Barack Obama," the prime minister quipped to uncomfortable laughter. "You won't be-lieve it, but the two of them went to the beach—the wife is also tanned," he added.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, a longtime Berlusconi ally, is quick to defend his boss. "Italy should be judged by our merits and accomplishments, not our scandals," he says. But they don't make his job any easier. "I have to spend time explaining the real story," he says. "If you look at the front pages of the press you see the scandal in the headlines, but if you look at page four or five, you see how the world asks Italy's help in Lebanon, how America appreciates Italy's work in Afghanistan ... But you know that good news is no news."

If only it were that simple. Italy still has the world's seventh-largest economy, and is a member of NATO, the G20, the euro zone, and just about every other club of powerful nations. But it punches well below its weight. Berlusconi's off-color jokes and reputation make other leaders uncomfortable. No surprise, then, that Italy is often left on the sidelines; to cite one important recent example, Rome has been excluded from the core contact group dealing with Iran over its nuclear weapons. Berlusconi doesn't help matters by claiming credit for initiatives where his role is marginal—for example, in the summer of 2008 he claimed it was he who sent French President Nicolas Sarkozy to Georgia to fend off the Russian invasion. Italy's military has served in Iraq and Afghanistan and suffered tragic losses. But it -left Iraq long ago and wants out of Afghanistan sooner rather than later.

Always inclined to put show over substance, Berlusconi works hard to make sure—through lawsuits,

investigations, and political pressure—that good news is about the only news Italians ever see. When an estimated 100,000 protesters turned out on the streets of Rome recently to support press freedom, the event got little or no coverage on the TV shows most Italians rely on for news. And no wonder: Berlusconi controls all three state TV networks, the three largest private channels, the country's largest publisher, a weekly newsmagazine, and a newspaper owned by his brother. Whenever a state network airs a critical segment, he declares that state media should support the government, and he has fired journalists who crossed him. Those outlets he doesn't control are frequent targets of legal action.

The tragedy is that Italy—a nation of brilliant intellectuals and artists, talented public servants, and creative business leaders—could do so much better. A few names are now being touted as possible successors to Berlusconi: Fiat chairman Luca Cordero di Montezemolo; Gianfranco Fini, the progressive heir to the former Fascist mantle; the economics minister, Giulio Tremonti; Foreign Minister Frattini; and Mario Draghi, governor of the Bank of Italy. But after years of indictments, investigations, leftist infighting, right-wing race baiting, and Berlusconi's habit of sucking up all the air in the center, true saviors for Italy are in very short supply.

The ultimate blame may lie with ordinary Italians. Author Umberto Eco wrote last month that the Italian public has accepted Berlusconi, and will accept the gagging of the press. "So why write about this when most Italians know very little—because the media, so tightly controlled by Berlusconi, tell them very little?" Eco asked. "The answer is simple. In 1931, Mussolini's Fascist regime made all 1,200 university professors swear fidelity. Only 12 refused, and lost their jobs ... Those 12 saved the honor of our universities—and of our country. That's why you have to say no, even when it may do no good."

And that's why Italy must say no once more. And tell Silvio it's time to go.

With Jacopo Barigazzi in Milan and Barbie Nadeau in Rome

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