



# The rise and fall of Silvio

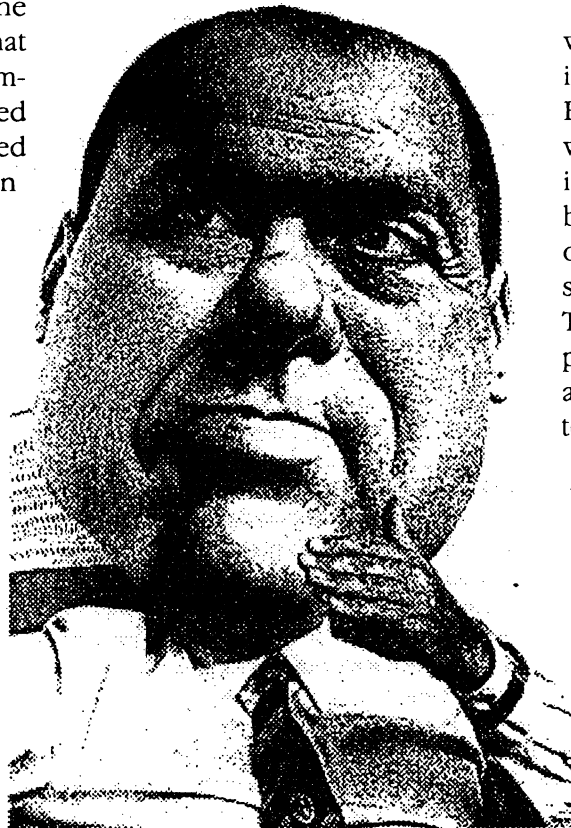
In the same month that reports emerged of a possible bid by Rupert Murdoch's News International to buy up a controlling interest in former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's media empire, it is timely to take a look at the rise and fall of that empire and to observe what happens when media moguls decide to enter politics. **David Walter** wrote this article for the British journal, *Index on Censorship*, earlier this year.

I N 1993, there was a real feeling of hope around in Italy. The country had been misgoverned for most of the past 40 years by the old *partitocrazia*, a system which involved frequent changes of government in which the same cast of characters moved round and round the scenery. On the understanding that the only real opposition, the Communist Party, could never be allowed to govern, the other parties colluded to split the spoils of office between them. The political establishment had its fingers in every pie. Millions of Italians depended on party patronage for their jobs, from chairmen of nationalised industries to receptionists in the party-run hotels.

A rare area where the Communists were allowed a share of the action was television. They controlled one of the three networks of the public television corporation RAI. The other two were in the hands of the Socialists and the Christian Democrats.

The old parties had become steadily more corrupt, until at last the chance came to bust the system. It was taken by a group of examining magistrates, led by Antonio di Pietro, who began in 1991 to plumb the depths of an almost bottomless well of sleaze. Beginning with a kick-back scandal involving an old people's home in Milan, they drew up a list of suspected fraudsters that read like a Who's Who of Italian politics.

The wave of scandals led to pressure for the electoral system to be changed, in the belief that this would lead to *l'alternanza*, an alternation of parties in government which would lead to a cleaner democracy. By 1993, a new system was in place which dif-



fered so much from the old one that it became known as the Second Republic, the First dating from post-World War II reconstruction being deemed to have died an undignified death. The Christian Democrats and Socialists who had dominated the old system were completely discredited, and fresh political forces emerged.

Favourites to win were the reform Communists, the PDS. There was also a respectable new centrist party led by Mario Segni, who had spearheaded the campaign for electoral reform, and the maverick populist Northern League under Umberto Bossi.

In the event, all these new players were outflanked by the late entrant into the race, the media mogul Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi possessed a weapon which no other party leader in any other Western democracy has been allowed to wield. He was the owner of three commercial television channels, plus three more pay TV stations and a number of newspapers and magazines. With the average Italian watching four hours of television a day, the power which Berlusconi had as a candidate for the post of prime minister was unprecedented.

In the crucial period before the electoral campaign proper opened, he used this power to devastating effect. When he launched his new party, Forza Italia, the event was given four hours of prime time on the most popular of his networks. It was promoted shamelessly thereafter on the cheap and tacky variety shows which fill so much of the airtime which he controls. The scantily clad 14-year old girls who perform song and dance routines on *Non e la Rai* would break off to plug Forza Italia. There were endless campaign spots too in the advertising breaks. The



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result was that within a month of the party being formed, it had 20 per cent of the vote in the polls.

During the campaign itself, there were strict new controls on the allocation of television time between the parties, and an impartial watchdog to ensure fairness. It was too late. By now the battle had already been won. The other parties could not compete with the slick packaging or the marketing men in Berlusconi's Fininvest Corporation, who had been drafted en masse into his political party. Fininvest funds were poured into the party too, helping to secure it an opulent suite of offices in the historic city centre of Rome on the inappropriately named Humility Street.

The Berlusconi propaganda was based on intensive opinion polling. The candidate's technique was to find out what the people wanted and then to promise it to them, even if that entailed promises which contradicted each other.

Berlusconi was careful not to expose himself to much hostile questioning during the campaign. RAI was now out of the hands of the political parties: a reform of 1993 had attempted to put it on the same footing as the BBC in Britain, under the supervision of an independent board who became known as the 'the professors'. Forza Italia spent the campaign accusing RAI of bias. Berlusconi's chief of staff, General Caligaris, remarked that, while in the old days RAI was split between the parties, now it was worse; the whole thing was controlled by Communists. Berlusconi refused to debate with the

opposition on RAI, although he did consent to one discussion on one of his own channels.

There was great anxiety at RAI about the Berlusconi victory. Having already secured half the outlets on Italian television for his interests as a businessman, Berlusconi now had the means to secure the other half for his role as prime minister. RAI was in a weak condition, with heavy debts, which could be used as a convenient excuse for restructuring which the prime minister might choose to impose.

Berlusconi stated early in his period of office that it was the role of state television to support the elected government of the state, a remark which he later partly retracted but which seemed to represent his true feelings on the matter. RAI was struggling to maintain its new-found impartiality. Two of its channels tended towards obsequiousness to the prime minister, while the third allowed itself occasional acts of irreverence. It took great pleasure in screening an embarrassing old film starring Berlusconi's actress wife Veronica Lario as a lesbian. It was not long, however, before Berlusconi moved in to clamp down on his old rival. He forced 'the professors' to resign on the grounds that their financial reconstruction plan was inadequate. He then intended to impose a new board himself. At this stage, however, the Italian President, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, stepped in. He had been pressed by the opposition parties to prevent Berlusconi gaining a complete monopoly over the media.

There was a compromise: the board would be appointed by the speakers of the two houses of the Italian parliament.

[A series of debacles including charges of corruption against senior executives of his company, including his brother Paolo] served to weaken the prime minister enormously. He had tried to run the government like his business, in an autocratic way which did not allow for democratic consultation, let alone consent. He has discovered that this does not work in a democracy, even in one as fragile as Italy's. □

### **Postscript 21 May 1995**

Magistrates in Milan have announced that they will bring former PM Silvio Berlusconi to trial on corruption charges. The indictment against Berlusconi alleged that various Fininvest subsidiaries paid bribes totalling \$265,000 to government tax inspectors. Berlusconi denied the allegations and said that the indictment was 'devoid of proof'. Berlusconi faces threats to his political and business interests from a referendum planned for next month on control of Italian television. In their indictment the magistrates said Berlusconi and executives of three Fininvest subsidiaries - Monadori, Italy's largest publisher, Videotime, a television company and Mediolanum life insurance - should stand trial.

**Source: SMH, 22 May 1995**