

## The Agony and the Bunga Bunga by Frank Bruni

September has been Italy's most uncertain month, with questions about whether the Parliament will pass an austerity package, if that package will be stringent enough and how Europe's fiscal stewards will react.

There's also this: what sort of celebration will the country's epically libidinous emperor — sorry, prime minister — orchestrate for his 75th birthday? Silvio Berlusconi's big milestone is about two weeks away, and you have to assume he'll pull out all the stops, but you also have to wonder what stops are left to be pulled. The man hasn't been shy about sating himself.

As we now know, thanks to his current trial on charges of paying for sex with a minor, he regularly assembles veritable harems of young women for bacchanals with a dress code that could be described as whimsical. He calls them "bunga bunga" parties, which has no particular translation and no need of one. The hormonal gist comes through.

The bunga allegations grabbing headlines last week were that Berlusconi, in moments of pulchritudinous piety, was treated to lap dances from women attired as nuns. This followed claims that he received ministrations from women outfitted as nurses. And it's said that Italy is a chauvinistic society! For Berlusconi, no profession is beyond a woman's pantomime.

We Americans have found great entertainment in all of this — lengthy Berlusconi exposés appeared recently in *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* — because it's lurid, yes, but also because it's reassuring. Our own political madness pales beside his triple-X opera buffa.

But we shouldn't just gape and laugh. His country's path from glorious to ridiculous, paved in part by his carnal and legal distractions, threatens the financial stability of Europe, and benefits no one. Beyond that, Italy presents a cautionary tale for many immodestly privileged Western democracies that have been lulled by comfort into complacency; have let too much silliness create too much damage; and haven't held leaders to adequate account.

Ours is one of them. America is in some ways a petit guignol version of Italy. We also coast on the accomplishments of yesteryear. Also neglect our infrastructure. Also watch young people struggle. Also waste precious time while lawmakers behave in petty, self-serving fashions. Also let money corrupt politics.

Money is Berlusconi's lance, his armor, his steed, his everything. A billionaire many times over, he uses it to engender loyalty, and his business empire reaches deep into the image-burnishing and opinion-manipulating realms of television, journalism and publishing. At the end of a long interview years ago, he asked me if a recent book of mine had been distributed in Italy. It hadn't.

"Would you like it to be?" he said.

But Italians have had his number for a while, and have seen their country's economy stagnate and debt rise over the last decade. And Berlusconi, in power for much of the last 17 years, has made minimal progress on necessary tax, regulatory and entitlement reforms.

So how does he last? I asked many smart, concerned Italians that question, and was told that Italians have been too slow to take a hard enough look at his shenanigans, and allowed him to entrench himself.

The opposition, meantime, hasn't mustered the maturity to move past its fractiousness and make him go away.

"The fact remains that there's no alternative," Giuliano Pisapia, Milan's new mayor, told me. Milan is a Berlusconi stronghold, and yet Pisapia unseated a Berlusconi loyalist, proving the prime minister's vulnerability. But nationally, Pisapia doesn't see someone poised to supplant Berlusconi.

In a country with such treasure and beauty, maybe hardship is dulled and the situation hasn't become quite bad enough.

I asked Mario Calabresi, a celebrated Italian journalist, why young Italians, whose unemployment rate is estimated to be about 27 percent, weren't protesting on the scale of the "indignados," or indignant, who crowd public squares in Spain. He said it was partly because their parents remain affluent enough to supply them with money for clothes, clubs and beach vacations, at least for now.

"You're indignado, but not so indignado that you'd rather go to the square than to the restaurant," he said as we sipped espresso on a cobbled piazza in Turin.

Still he hasn't given up his belief that Italians will pull it together. Neither has the mayor of Florence, Matteo Renzi, an emerging center-left star.

"If Italians decide they really want to change 20 years of immobility, silence and political scandals, we have a future," he said Monday in his Palazzo Vecchio office, whose walls and ceiling are covered in magnificent frescoes.

"It's not easy to work here," he added, "because you're surrounded by the past. But I want to believe the most beautiful page in Florence's history hasn't been written." I hope that's true for all of Italy. For us, too.