

Fêting and Fighting Italian Unification

Judith Harris (February 14, 2011)



Just over one month from now Italians will honor the 150th anniversary of Italian unification with a formal holiday March 17. Correction: most but not all Italians will celebrate the day, and at this point no one is certain just how it will be celebrated. The most openly hostile are some of the political leaders of the Trentino-Alto Adige Region, who claim that their heritage is Austrian.

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ROME – They had never asked to be part of Italy, they say, but were victims of an Italy forced upon them. As Regional Governor Luis Durnwalder of the Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP) proclaimed bluntly Feb. 7, “We were annexed to Rome against our will. We have no reason to celebrate the unification of Italy.”

It is true that three out of four in the [Alto Adige](#) [2] are native German speakers, but his words ignore, among many other things, that one out of four inhabitants is a native Italian speaker. Durnwalder goes so far as to concede that if these Italian speakers in his the area he represents really want to celebrate Italy, that is their business.

And yet Durnwalder is indeed part of Italy, with representatives in both houses of the Parliament he sneers at in Rome. His party also has representation—and for Italy—at the European Parliament. Waspish local commentators further remind their readers that in two recent votes of confidence, Durnwalder's party's abstention in crucial votes in Parliament made a difference to all of Italy by helping to keep the present government in office in two votes of no-confidence: first that for Premier Silvio Berlusconi Dec. 14 and again this month for Culture Minister Sandro Bondi.

Even in his home turf Durnwalder's words outraged some residents. "My grandfather and my great-uncle are dead and buried at Innsbruck, but they were Italian. Anyway, this is no time to radicalize public opinion—it's time to project ourselves into the global world with new rules, new international authorities, and with the culture and knowledge that makes everything more beautiful," was one heated protest in an on-line debate. Two young women were similarly irate. "What a slap in the face. We are from [Trento](#) [3] and will never again vote a South Tyrolean into Parliament. From now on we vote only for Italians."

In another concrete protest, hotel cancellations for ski vacations came flooding in. "The news got a lot of attention in the national press," acknowledged the local tourism gaulleiter Dado Duzzi. "There was a harsh reaction from Italian tourists. We hope the protests will stop with the e-mails. We don't want to lose our clientele." To fight back, local ski hotels have taken to offering special patriotic deals for tourists for the mid-winter long weekend break (a "ponte" or bridge) offered by the sesquicentennial celebration, called "Offerte Ponte dell'Unità d'Italia Trentino Alto Adige."

The Volkspartei came into being in May 1945, with the edelweiss the party's symbol. From the outset there were local protests that both post-World War One and Two peace treaties had maintained an unfair division of the Tyrolian mountain area, with Italy arbitrarily granted the Southern tier. Mussolini fought to reduce the basic non-Italian culture there and eliminated its local political parties, reborn in the postwar era. Anti-Italian feeling brought a spate of terrorist stunts, which the SVP coyly describes like this:

"In 1961 some South Tyroleans expressed their displeasure and their disappointment in Italy's uncompromising attitude through bomb attacks on electricity pylons." (For full details, see: <http://www.svpartei.org/de/english> [4])

Another raining on what ought to be a great national parade—and far more seriously than Durnwalder by dint of his position—is Roberto Calderoli, who represents the Northern League in the government, where he serves the somewhat ambiguous function of "Minister for Simplification." In his simplified view, taking a day off is an invitation to an extended weekend that could cost the country "billions of euros."

His explanation: "It is simply unacceptable that the March 17 holiday would mean that many public offices would be closed. In a time of crisis like this it seems paradoxical to weigh ourselves down with the costs of a holiday. An event as significant as the 150th anniversary of Italian unification can be celebrated with dignity by going to work instead of just staying home. Closing public offices risks putting jobs into the private sector, he concluded.

But this argument does not hold water with the private sector, represented by [Confindustria](#) [5] president Emma Marcegaglia. She says that a long weekend would be the inevitable result of declaring the day a full public holiday, and would be too costly for private industry—hence not a beneficiary. Will the government step it? So far it is undecided, and Berlusconi, who can only go so far in risking alienation of Calderoli's and Umberto Bossi's Northern League, is yet to make any decision.

In some ways one can sympathize with the Trento crowd. All this should have been hammered out a year ago, not four weeks before the event. Indeed, one Trentino factory owner phoned into a Rai radio talk show to say, "I'd have been happy to celebrate the day, but I'd made a lot of commitments before I even knew about the holiday. They had 150 years to plan it - why wait till the last minute?"



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- [3] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trento>
- [4] <http://www.svpartei.org/de/english>
- [5] <http://www.confindustria.it/conf2007/hpeng.nsf/hp?readform>