

For the Senate, High Culture and International Input

judith Harris (September 01, 2013)



On August 30 President Giorgio Napolitano appointed four Senators for Life who replace those who had died during the past year. All four are outstanding cultural figures who are also particularly well known abroad: orchestra conductor Claudio Abbado, architect Renzo Piano, Nobel prize-winning scientist Carlo Rubbia and, the only female, Elena Cattaneo, a researcher in pharmacology. For a majority of Italians, Napolitano's selection of distinguished cultural figures is not only a badge of honor, but also a model for Italian youth. Their experience brings an international approach into the Italian Senate.

ROME - In the present political climate not a sparrow falls from the sky without someone crying foul (or, better, fowl), and so it was with four appointments to Senator for Life, made by [President Giorgio Napolitano](#) [2] on August 30.

The appointees, who replace four who had died during the past year, are all outstanding cultural figures who are also particularly well known abroad: orchestra conductor Claudio Abbado, architect [Renzo Piano](#) [3], Nobel prize-winning scientist [Carlo Rubbia](#) [4] and, the only female, [Elena Cattaneo](#) [5], a researcher in pharmacology. The last such appointment prior to these was that of economist [Mario Monti](#) [6], named lifetime senator just one week prior to his becoming premier on Napolitano's watch in November of 1911.

For a majority of Italians, the President's selection of distinguished cultural figures is not only a badge of honor, but also a model for Italian youth. For the political birdwatchers on the right, however, the new appointments are tainted. "As Andreotti once said, 'Thinking bad thoughts is a sin but sometimes you get it right,'" was the comment by PdL coordinator Rocco Girlanda of Umbra. The reason for the skepticism: on Sept. 9 a Senate commission begins discussion on whether or not former Premier Silvio Berlusconi will be forced to resign as senator. For some in his Freedom party (PdL), the new nominations reflect Napolitano's unsubtle attempt to pack the Senate with individuals likely to vote for stripping Berlusconi of his senatorial status--that is, for his decadenza. Later the entire Senate must vote.

However, even without these new additions to the Senate, in Italy's current three-way political party tie two can always outvote the third: Berlusconi's conservatives in the PdL; the left-leaning Partito Democratico or PD, and the cranky left of Beppe Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S. For this reason few here believe that Berlusconi will retain his status as Senator.

One who continues to try for an amicable solution, even now, is Gianni Letta, 77, four times Berlusconi's undersecretary of state and on the board of Goldman Sachs. Letta, who belonged to the Vatican super-club "Gentlemen of His Holiness," has long been the PdL's unofficial ambassador to the Vatican as well as chief negotiator with the Quirinal Palace over the question of the President's granting an amnesty to Berlusconi. As it happens, Letta is also the uncle of the current moderate leftist premier Enrico Letta. (This "Gentlemanly" super-club of which Uncle Gianni Letta was a member, incidentally, was dissolved by Pope Francis following Vatican bank IOR scandals involving some of its members, though not Letta.)

The mini-protest of the PdL is overshadowed, however, by the general sense of admiration for Napolitano's choices. All four have long experience outside Italy, and are expected to bring to the Senate a fresh international approach.

Youngest appointee is biotechnologist Elena Cattaneo, 50. Born at Paladina, near Bergamo, after obtaining her PhD she spent a number of years at MIT in Boston before returning to the University of Milan, where she directs the Stem Cell Biology and Pharmacology of Neurodegenerative Diseases. Professor Cattaneo is coordinator of the European NeuroStemcell research project, to which 16 research laboratories contribute. Her research has focused on the study of neural stem cells and in particular of the neurodegenerative Huntington's Disease. She is also the author of some 100 scientific papers.

Pianist and orchestra conductor Claudio Abbado, 80, born in Milan, made his conducting debut at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1960. In 1963 he was awarded the Mitropoulos Prize at the New York Philharmonic and in 1968 made his debut at Covent Garden in London. From 1968 through 1986 he was artistic director of La Scala while, in 1971, serving as chief conductor at the Vienna Philharmonic. Later he became artistic director of the Vienna Staatsoper and (1989-2001) of the Berlin Philharmonic. Most recently he has been artistic director of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra and the Orchestra Mozart of Bologna.

Renzo Piano, 76, of Genoa is recognized as one of the world's foremost architects and was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1998 by U.S. President Bill Clinton. Among his best known projects is the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, where his winning design bested over 700 other candidates from 49 countries. In Rome his Parco della Musica has been an extraordinary success, while for New York he designed the new Columbia University Campus. Since 1994 he has also served UNESCO as a goodwill ambassador. In 2006 he became the first Italian to be listed by Time magazine as among the 100 most influential individuals in the world. His latest project is a new Justice Building for Paris.



Born in 1934 in Gorizia, Carlo Rubbia is considered one of the world's foremost physicists. Director General of the Cern research laboratory in Geneva from 1989 to 1993, he transferred to Harvard University where he was physics professor for 18 years. In 1984 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics together with Simon van der Meer for their discovery of the W and Z particles. A former president of Enea, at present he continues his research studies, including on cosmic neutrinos, at Cern and at the National Laboratories in the Gran Sasso in the Abruzzo.

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