

Rome Journal; Official Favors: Oil That Makes Italy Go Round

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Italy breathed a sigh of relief today upon learning that the country's highest court of appeal had ruled that influence-peddling is not a crime. The only punishable offense, the judges decided, is overstating one's power to exert influence.

"Essentially, the judges are saying what everybody in Italy believes: It is not a crime, as long as you do it well," Franco Ferrarotti, an Italian sociologist said of the Wednesday ruling on "*raccomandazione*," the Italian custom of seeking and receiving special treatment from people in power, or close to it.

"This is our version of the Protestant ethic," Mr. Ferrarotti said. "When a favor works successfully, it ceases to be a crime and becomes a work of art."

Skepticism about the merits of meritocracy in Italy is widespread and may be one reason the court overruled the conviction of Mario Campana, 57, the director of a civil court in Potenza, in southern Italy, who was jailed in October for having promised to "put in a good word" to expedite the legal proceedings of an impatient plaintiff. As evidence, the prosecutors showed that Mr. Campana received 88 pounds of fish in return for his assistance — proof, perhaps, of squid pro quo.

The judges decided that Mr. Campana had not misrepresented his ability to do a friend a favor, since he not only could, but did, and therefore, was not at fault. "The law punishes the false boast of being able to exert influence, and not the real traffic of influence," their ruling explained.

The court allowed that for that infraction, a civil servant could be subject to disciplinary penalties, but not criminal prosecution.

The ability to solicit favors from someone in a higher place, be it the post office manager, the minister's cousin, or the chief of surgery's butcher, is all part of the Italian art of getting things done. The *raccomandazione* has been the oil of Italian society since the Roman Empire. Terzo Maffei, a retired pharmaceutical company executive who in 1984 published a vast collection of Italian letters of recommendation, ranging from pleas on behalf of Puccini to intercessions by Gabriele D'Annunzio, said the practice was even more ancient.

"Cicero," he said admiringly, "was a great *raccomandatore*." The custom is so ingrained in Italian culture that entire books and movies have been devoted to the subject, including a 1984 satirical film starring Giancarlo Giannini, entitled, "*Piccone Sent Me*."

Or, as the same court put it when it overturned a similar conviction in 1992, "the seeking of a recommendation is by now so deeply rooted in our culture that most people believe it is an indispensable tool when seeking even that to which they are entitled."

The custom of recommending a friend's son or a son's friend reached its apex under the many governments of Giulio Andreotti, a wily political operator whose talent for dispensing favors was legendary, but perhaps over-solicited. The *raccomandazione*, he once complained, "is like when a spectator at the stadium rises to his feet to see better and everyone else rises up with him."

The former prime minister, now 82, was acquitted in 1999 on charges that he extended his patronage to the Sicilian Mafia. A judge in Palermo today postponed a new trial sought by prosecutors intent on appealing his acquittal, saying the court had more pressing cases to hear.

A survey released this week that was conducted among high school seniors in Sicily, where the unemployment rate hovers at 20 percent, suggested that the custom was not fading fast. More than a third of the young people interviewed said they would have to rely on a *raccomandazione* for a job. Fourteen percent said they would be willing to turn to the Mafia for help.

There have been a few efforts to curb the habit. Maretta Scoca, a former member of Parliament, tried to submit legislation in 1998 to make it illegal for public servants to make or accept *raccomandazioni*, but she could not persuade any of her colleagues to co-sign her bill. "Not only did I not find others who wanted to denounce the practice as scandalous," she said, somewhat bitterly. "I was treated with impatience."

Giuliano Ferrara, the editor of an irreverent conservative daily paper, *Il Foglio*, said the Italian reliance on using one's friends in high places was rooted in the highly centralized political system, as well as Italy's thick layers of bureaucracy. "Say I want to remove a trash container that is too near my villa in Tuscany," he said. "I can petition the mayor and town councilors with letters and phone calls, or I can call up a friend of the mayor. Which do you think is faster and easier?"

The prevalence of *raccomandazioni* rarely causes a stir, but it created a small to-do last year, when Gad Lerner, one of Italy's best-known television journalists, resigned as head of a top news program of RAI, Italy's state-controlled television network. Mr. Lerner resigned after his news program broadcast graphic footage of children being molested by pedophiles. On his way out, Mr. Lerner went on the air to apologize to viewers, but he also lashed out at a right-wing member of Parliament, Mario Landolfi, head of a parliamentary commission that oversees RAI, complaining that the politician had slipped him a note after a dinner meeting with the name of a journalist, and asked Mr. Lerner to find his protégé a job.

Mr. Landolfi denied the charge, and the incident blew over. Mr. Ferrara pronounced Mr. Landolfi guilty mostly of "bad taste."

If there is concern over the culture of *raccomandazione* it mainly seems to be a lament over a loss of style. "In the 18th century, the letters were more convincing — they were beautifully written to render the request more agreeable to the recipient," Mr. Maffei noted wistfully. "After the war, letters of recommendation became more banal, form letters written by secretaries. There is no more beautiful prose."

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