

Tanti Primati Ma....

By Dr. Francesco Nicotra



It's true that our way of life is admired by practically everyone, everywhere, perhaps because it stands for top quality in everything from our food and wines, clothing, design and craftsmanship. Despite the current economic crisis we are still counted amongst the eight most industrialized nations in the world. But it is also

true that as a nation we have defects and anomalies that seem to be embedded in our DNA.

I speak of corruption, carelessness, a lack of discipline, improvisation, and a couldn't-care-less attitude - and our European partners, not to mention the press over on the other side of the Atlantic, often criticize us for them, deservedly so. Corruption, however, is our most serious defect and it is so widespread now that only the most grievous cases create enough of a scandal to make it to the front pages.

Corruption is rife in many public administrations - regional, provincial, local and in assorted institutions too - enough to mean that our magistrates are kept extremely busy, although to date, their efforts do not appear to have successfully excised this cancer that is gnawing away at the heart of our nation.

The most recent scandal erupted in Abruzzo, a hard-working mountainous region in the southern center of the country. The president of Abruzzo, Ottaviano Del Turco, along with seven of his entourage - including two councilors - was recently arrested. He is charged with receiving some 15 million Euro from entrepreneur Vincenzo Angelini, known as "the Clinic King of Abruzzo". Apparently "tired of being milked," Angelini lodged a complaint with the magistracy and handed over a series of tape-recordings, documents and photographs in support of his accusations, describing those concerned as "greedy rats."

Ottaviano Del Turco, 63, is a well-known figure in Italian politics. He was a union man, president of the now dismantled socialist party and, most important of all, the respected president of the anti-Mafia parliamentary commission. The investigating magistrates have stated that the accusations are supported by evidence, but Del Turco has denied everything. It should also be remembered that the man making the accusations, Vincenzo Angelini, is not, one might say, a saint. He spilled the beans so that he could avoid being arrested himself, admitting that he had received

inflated payments for services provided by his clinics.

The health service, funded by the state to the tune of some 102 billion Euros a year, is the public sector in which corruption is most rife. There have been scandals in almost all of Italy's regions, especially in the south. In almost every case, corruption and a huge waste of public money are an inseparable duo, although the sums of money involved differ considerably from region to region.

Corriere della Sera, one of the most authoritative newspapers in Italy, reported that every hospital bed occupied in Lombardy costs the taxpayer 455 Euros per day, while in San Camillo, one of the largest hospitals in Rome, that cost has reached 817 Euros. The health service costs Sicily 8.5 billion Euros per year, 30 percent more than health expenditures for all of Finland. The Villa Santa Teresa in Bagheria, not far from Palermo, billed the state for operations that cost 21 times more than the same operations in Milan. In another clinic, the Santa Rita, a recent investigation by magistrates led to the arrest of dishonest doctors who, in order to make money, operated on patients who had nothing wrong with them at all.

But it is not just in the health service where dishonesty prevails - it also occurs in many areas where public administrations have an interest. Everyone in Italy knows that there are corrupt university professors who pass their students in exchange for favors, that examiners approving licenses to drive a car or a boat are susceptible to "donations" - and the list of such situations is practically endless. Among state employees, absenteeism is endemic. According to the figures released on 2005, state employees rack up an average of 17 sick days a year, in addition, of course, to a month's vacation. Those employed in government service are among the greatest offenders with an average of 26 days a year. The new and energetic public administration minister, Renato Brunetta has recently decreed that a medical certificate is now required to justify even a single day off work.

The umpteenth episode of corruption to end up in the papers featured Italian cycling champion Riccardo Riccò who had tested positive for drugs during the Tour de France. He was disqualified, arrested and booed by the French public. What a disgrace!

Let there be no doubt however, that many honest, responsible Italians are vehemently opposed to this sorry state of affairs and many courageous magistrates, journalists and politicians do not hesitate to speak up when it is for the good of the community. True, they are in a minority, but they are the righteous few on whose shoulders Italy's hopes rest to become a country that is respected for its moral values and not just for its Ferraris, food, wine and fashion. ▲