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## **Sex, lies and public money: Recent scandals in Britain and Italy**

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## **Sex, lies and public money: Recent scandals in Britain and Italy.**

### **Introduction**

Since the early 1990s in many democracies there have been growing levels of public concern about the standards of conduct of public office-holders. Such concern can be seen, in the UK case, in terms of survey data (showing, for example, a decline in Transparency International's corruption perceptions index score from 8.6 in 1995 to 7.7 in 2008); the growth in the volume of legislation concerning standards that has characterised the period since the setting up of the Committee on Standards in 1994, and the growing attention of the mass media to issues of corruption and integrity (as revealed by the number of newspaper headlines containing words such as 'corrupt' and 'bribe' and their derivations, 'corruption', 'corrupting', 'corrupted', 'bribery', 'bribed' etc.). That such growing concerns are by no means confined to the UK is revealed when one examines for the presence of such terms the headlines of foreign newspapers (Figures 1 and 2).

In looking for explanations for these growing concerns, one is immediately struck by the number of high-profile scandals – including *Tangentopoli* in Italy; the various allegations of 'sleaze' that played a prominent role in the downfall of the Conservatives in Britain; the party finance scandal that led to the disgrace of Helmut Kohl in Germany; the resignation, in 1999, of the entire EU Commission in the wake of publication of evidence of fraud, corruption and mismanagement at senior levels – that seem to have marked the period since the beginning of the 1990s. That there really has been an increase in the incidence of scandals of this kind is suggested by the nature of politics in democratic countries in the post-Cold War world. This is a world in which absence of the once deep-seated ideological conflicts between left and right (which the power struggle between the US and the USSR at the level of international politics had served to underpin) have everywhere made policy differences between mainstream parties harder to identify than in the past. Consequently, the terrain of political conflict has to a degree shifted from that of policy to that of morality with parties increasingly attempting to compete with each other by throwing mud and attempting to damage each other by fomenting scandal, as the Lewinsky affair in America showed so forcefully – a phenomenon that Ginsberg and Shefter (2002) have called 'politics by other means'. It is a world in which media developments have rendered the lives of the individuals who walk on the public stage 'much more visible than they ever were in the past' (Thompson, 2000: 6). If this has enabled politicians to compete by presenting themselves not just as leaders, but as human beings and therefore as 'one of us', then by encouraging their audiences increasingly to assess them in terms of their character as individuals (Thompson, 2000: 39-41) it has rendered them more vulnerable to the above-mentioned drives in the direction of politics by other means.

Scandals of this kind can have a number of significant consequences. They may damage or even bring about the downfall of those touched by them; they may produce moral panics; they may change public values; they may be the catalysts of significant

social change. These consequences are in no sense inevitable, however. Politicians, in Britain at least, if caught with half-masted trousers, have, as Garrard (2006: 18) points out, ‘as much scandalous potential as they did in the nineteenth century’. Yet when in 1992, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats was obliged to admit that he had had an affair with his then secretary Patricia Howard, screaming tabloid headlines did nothing to prevent his personal popularity rising, after he had made his public statement, from 34 to 47 percent according to polls, while his party moved ahead from 13 to 15 percent (*Sarasota Herald Tribune*, 1992). One of the most significant consequences of the cash-for-questions and other scandals in Britain in the early 1990s has been a significant narrowing of the boundaries of permissible conduct for those in positions of public trust, both as a result of the enactment of codes of conduct and, as a consequence, through a tightening of the limits of public tolerance. On the other hand, though the presence of widespread corruption in the political and administrative system became a major political issue in Italy in the early 1990s, a few years later the question faded from the political agenda; anti-corruption policies have been few, social sanctions against those alleged to be involved in corruption rather mild – ‘as epitomised by the case of Prime Minister Berlusconi who, as centre-right leader, won the elections of 2001 and 2008 despite being under investigation in several corruption cases and inquiries’ (Vannucci, 2009: 235).

But while we know that the consequences of scandals are neither uniform nor inevitable, we know very little about how and why their impacts vary. Presumably, answers to these questions are to be found by looking both at the nature of specific scandals and at the characteristics of the political and social contexts in which they take place. With this in mind, we propose in the remaining paragraphs to examine in some detail the scandal surrounding MPs’ expenses in the UK and the recent allegations concerning the conduct of Silvio Berlusconi in the area of personal morality in Italy. By comparing the two, we ought to be able to develop some suggestions about the conditions under which scandals have the effects that they sometimes do have. Of course, these affairs are very different in many respects. What they have in common is that they have ultimately been driven by the perception that the alleged wrong-doing has cheapened the democratic process, resulting in more or less significant losses of authority for the political actors involved. Yet despite these commonalities, the consequences of the two rows, in terms of voting behaviour and parties’ electoral fortunes have so far been rather different. Why is this?

It is only worth asking this question if we are satisfied that the two affairs are comparable and that, against what actually happened, the assumption of a negative impact in both cases was *prima facie* at least a reasonable expectation. These issues are dealt with in the second and third sections respectively. In the fourth section it is suggested that the different impact of the two is to be explained in terms of the content and distribution of public attitudes and the power of those at the centre of the affairs to change attitudes and use them to defend themselves. We attempt, in the final section to use this discussion to draw some conclusions about the distinctiveness of Britain and Italy as liberal democracies and thus the conditions under which scandals have given effects.

## The two affairs

2009 is likely to be remembered by most British parliamentarians as one of the most traumatic in their careers as politicians; for as the year of the great MPs' expenses scandal, it saw hundreds of MPs publicly accused of having abused, for personal gain, the system for reimbursement of expenses incurred in the performance of their duties – leading to large numbers of resignations and dismissals; an unprecedented degree of public anger, and pressure for political reform going well beyond the issue of expenses itself. One of the most high-profile of the MPs involved, the former cabinet minister, Hazel Blears, explained her resignation from the Government by saying,

I'd had four weeks of intense media pressure, the like of which I have never known, not just on me but on my husband, my dad, my family. At that point I'd had enough ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8097955.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8097955.stm))

Meanwhile another MP wrote on her political blog that the scandal had created such an unbearable atmosphere at Westminster that everyone there feared a suicide, and that many of her colleagues were 'beginning to crack' ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8063005.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8063005.stm)).

What outraged the public about the revelations were really two things, first, the fact that Parliament had attempted to prevent disclosure despite the passage, in 2000, of the Freedom of Information Act which gives the public a general right of access to information held by public authorities. There are certain absolute and qualified exemptions under the Act with the right to appeal to an Information Commissioner where an applicant for information believes his or her request has been wrongly rejected. And in fact the scandal originated in October 2004 when the journalist, Heather Brooke, began to ask for details of MPs' expenses and when refusals led to a series of appeals which in their turn led to the attempt – through a House of Commons motion debated in January 2009 and then withdrawn under public pressure – to exempt MPs' expenses from the scope of the Freedom of Information Act. In the meantime, a series of media exposés culminated in May with the publication by the *Daily Telegraph* of a leaked copy of all the expenses claims, which it revealed in instalments from 8 May over several weeks.

What scandalised the public in the second place is that MPs appeared to have taken advantage of a loose specification and application of the rules on expenses to profit financially. For example, the so-called Green Book parliamentary expenses rules allowed MPs to claim the costs of running a second home in recognition of the fact that they in effect have to live in two places: in their constituencies and somewhere in or near London to enable them to attend Parliament. This so-called 'additional cost' allowance enabled MPs to claim up to £24,006 per annum for things like the mortgage interest payments and the utility bills associated with a second home – but officials also allowed claims for furniture and refurbishments, electrical items and food, and it came to light that MPs were able repeatedly to switch the designation of their second homes, enabling them to claim for renovating and furnishing more than one property. MPs could use renovations

significantly to add to the value of a property and then sell it, or claim for a second home while in fact renting it out. They could also designate a property as their second home to the parliamentary fees office while designating it as their primary residence with the tax authorities in order thereby to avoid paying tax on any capital gain when they sold it. When submitting expense claims, MPs had to sign a declaration confirming that the expenses had been incurred exclusively and necessarily for the purposes of performing their duties as a Member of Parliament, but they did not have to provide receipts for anything under £250 and it seems that fees office staff were unwilling to challenge members who had declared that their expenses were legitimate. Consequently, a number of the revelations, when they were made, provided the material for stinging media satire, the claims of Tories Douglas Hogg (for clearing the moat at his manor) and Peter Viggers (for an ornamental duck house) being just two of the most memorable examples.

Thompson (2000: 13) defines 'scandal' as something that 'refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response'; and the MPs' expenses row clearly fits the five criteria he draws from this definition. First, it clearly involved the transgression of norms or moral codes – in this case norms about value for money, the proper use of reimbursement systems and so forth. A second criterion of a scandal is that, while known about by others, or strongly believed to exist, the events in question involve an element of secrecy or concealment – and this too is certainly true of the MPs' expenses case as we have seen. Third, there has to be a degree of public disapproval, and in the case of the expenses row it is enough cite the results of the Ipsos MORI poll carried out at the end of May (<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2349>): over a half said they would not vote for a sitting MP caught up in the scandal even if it meant voting against the party they would want to win the election. Fourth, scandals involve public speech acts that communicate disapproval to others (thereby making them partly constitutive of the scandal itself) so that they are typically bound up with 'opprobrious discourse' (Thompson, 2000: 20) articulated through the mass media of communications. This was an especially significant feature of the expenses affair; for it was the success of the media in keeping the issue alive by revelations extending over several weeks that fed politicians' fear and uncertainty about whether they would be the next to be exposed, and for what, thereby creating the sense that an entire political class was on trial. Finally, scandals threaten the reputations of the individuals whose actions lie at the centre of them – and here again, it is enough to refer to the Ipsos MORI poll: 48 percent felt that half or more of MPs were corrupt; over two thirds felt that half or more MPs used power for their own personal gain as compared to only a minority having believed this in 2006.

The Berlusconi case also very clearly fitted these same five criteria. It all began on 28 April when *La Repubblica* newspaper wrote that the prime minister had attended the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party of Noemi Letizia, an aspiring showgirl, as a result of which his wife announced that she would seek a divorce. Later, it was revealed that public prosecutors in Bari had begun a corruption investigation into an entrepreneur – Giampaolo Tarantini – suspected of procuring high-class prostitutes to attend parties at Berlusconi's mansion, Palazzo Grazioli, in Rome.

True, revelations about politicians' purely private misdemeanours are rarely the cause of scandal in Italy; but the norms perceived as having been transgressed in this case went beyond the area of sex and the premier's marriage and concerned at least three aspects, first, abuse of office of an informal kind in that Berlusconi's wife's announcement was accompanied by her denunciation, as 'shamelessly tacky', of his decision to field as candidates in the European elections a number of young women who, it seems, kept him company in his free time and whose careers he had assisted in the world of entertainment. He was also accused of abuse of office in a more formal sense when it was alleged that he had used 'official government aircraft to fly private guests, including young actresses and a Neapolitan balladeer described as his personal "minstrel", to his luxury villa in Sardinia' (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 June, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/5552751/Silvio-Berlusconi-girls-gaffes-and-graft-appeal-to-Italian-voters.html>). Second, the scandal involved allegations of lying. Shortly after the Noemi Letizia affair broke *la Repubblica* newspaper publicly put to him ten questions surrounding the affair which he answered first one way and then another. For example, asked when and how he got to know Noemi's father, on 29 April he replied that the father was a long-standing Socialist party member he had known for years and who had been the chauffeur of the former Socialist Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi. Later that day, after Craxi's son asserted that his father's chauffeur had been someone else, the Prime Minister's office put out a statement simply denying that Berlusconi had ever suggested that Letizia had been Craxi's driver. Third, in the case of the candidates issue, Berlusconi was charged with demeaning women by exploiting the physical appearances of females to gain political advantage and of cheapening the democratic process and the institutions of state: it seemed that for at least some of the young women, beyond being given a helping hand by Berlusconi, it was a matter of indifference whether they got on in the world of politics or entertainment and this sustained the impression that what was fundamentally at issue here was relationships of dubious propriety in exchange for public office.

The second of Thompson's criteria was clearly fulfilled by the evidence, of which the chauffeur case described above was a part, of the prime minister's willingness to be economical with the truth. That the affair was met with a degree of public disapproval was revealed by the results of a poll published in *La Repubblica* in May. 20 percent said that they now had a worse opinion of Berlusconi following the news related to his possible divorce ([www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/italians\\_assess\\_berlusconi\\_after\\_divorce\\_row/](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/italians_assess_berlusconi_after_divorce_row/)). Meanwhile, in July, after further revelations, those having confidence in Berlusconi fell below 50 percent for the first time, down seven percentage points from April ([www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/berlusconi\\_falls\\_below\\_50\\_mark\\_in\\_italy/](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/berlusconi_falls_below_50_mark_in_italy/)). As in the case of the expenses row, so too in this case the fourth criterion, 'oprobrious discourse' articulated through the mass media, was particularly salient in that a very public struggle took place between *la Repubblica* and the prime minister, over the newspaper's ten questions to which it loudly and repeatedly demanded responses – while Berlusconi accused the newspaper and its editor of conducting a smear campaign driven by envy and hatred and urged businesses to undertake an advertising boycott (in turn leading the newspaper's sister publication, *l'Espresso*, to announce the possibility of

legal action over the remarks). Finally, the scandal clearly placed the prime minister's reputation at stake. As he visibly struggled to defend himself against allegations of lying, and against the increasingly strident media satire that accompanied each new revelation, the general sense that he had lost control of events inevitably undermined his authority. The loss of authority was especially acutely felt in the international sphere where satire in the foreign press was especially damaging to the country's prestige thanks to the specific context in which it took place. This was one in which, with France and Germany now having two very pro-US governments in office, Italy mattered less to the White House – while Berlusconi's decision to sign a deal with Russia on the South Stream gas link in competition with an alternative, western-backed gas pipeline designed to ease dependence on Russian gas, had caused anger in Washington and Brussels. So in the weeks following the initial revelations all the signs were that the scandal was beginning to dent the loyalty of his followers – especially as ministers feared that the investigations surrounding Tarantini might widen and that allegations by Patrizia D'Addario, who claimed she was paid by Tarantini to attend parties at Berlusconi's private residences and that she spent the night of the US election with him, might prove to be true.

### **Their consequences**

For all these reasons, the potential consequences of the scandal were highly significant. Berlusconi's party had been constantly the most-voted since the early 1990s. He had become one of the longest-serving major political leaders on the continent (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2009: 102). Consequently he was, first, the centre around which essentially everything in Italian politics revolved. On the one hand, he was the fulcrum around which the centre right was built and whose unity depended almost entirely on his continued popularity. On the other hand, opposition to him was the only common denominator of the parties on the centre left – and thus the source of their weakness and division; for while the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD) had sought to expand towards the centre by shelving anti-Berlusconi rhetoric, this had deprived it still further of any clear identity leaving it vulnerable to the incursions of its allies to which many of its voters felt closer in any event (Diamanti, 2008). As Giuliano Urbani (2009), Culture Secretary in the 2001 government, pointed out at the beginning of the year: 'to be on the centre right means to support Berlusconi, to be on the centre left means to oppose him'. Third, Berlusconi exercised unassailable power over his own party – essentially his own personal creation and without any factions to speak of. Largely as a consequence of these three factors, when he took office in 2008, he did so as the head of what looked like being the strongest government in Italy's post-war history. But what this also meant was that were Berlusconi forced from office, then survival of his party, coalition and therefore government might become very uncertain indeed.

The potential consequences of the expenses scandal were likewise significant. Already, the unprecedented decline in turnout in 2001, with the merest of recoveries in 2005, had led to widespread discussion of a perceived crisis of participation (at least in conventional politics) especially among the young with several research studies throwing light on the underlying attitudes and outlooks. 'The Power Commission reported that "the



level of alienation felt towards politicians, the main political parties and the key institutions of the political system is extremely high and widespread” in the population as a whole’ (Sloam, 2007: 549). Pattie et al. (2004: 44) wrote about ‘a very significant decline in public confidence in government...over the past forty years’. Sloam (2007) suggested that salient attitudes of the young were a lack of trust of politicians; a belief that there are no real ideological differences between the main parties; overwhelming feelings of powerlessness. Clearly, the expectation had to be that if anything the expenses scandal was likely to reinforce such attitudes – with potential consequences of the kind that had been listed by the Power Commission (2006: 15):

- the weakening of the mandate and legitimacy for elected governments – whichever party is in power – because of plummeting turnout;
- the further weakening of political equality because whole sections of the community feel estranged from politics;
- the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors;
- the weakening of effective recruitment into politics;
- the rise of undemocratic political forces;
- the rise of a ‘quiet authoritarianism’ within government.

In the event, neither scandal had the potential consequences we have described (or at least has not apparently had such consequences thus far); but of the consequences they *have* had, those of the expenses scandal seem the most significant, despite what one might argue are the similar ‘dimensions’ of the two affairs. The expenses scandal was large thanks to the numbers involved, the Berlusconi scandal thanks to the status of the person at the centre of it. A crude measure of the scandals’ relative dimensions might be had by examining newspaper headlines: a perusal of the LexisNexis Professional on-line database – which contains full-text articles from UK national and local newspapers – throws up 331 *Guardian* articles having the expression ‘MPs’ expenses’ somewhere in them in the month of May. A perusal of *la Repubblica*’s on-line data base throws up 140 articles that in the same month mentioned the Berlusconi scandal.

Despite this similarity, the consequences of the two affairs contrasted sharply in at least three ways. First, at the European elections held in the first week of June, the Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL) took 35.3 percent of the vote as compared to 34.9 percent obtained by its constituent parties in 2004. In the UK, by contrast, Labour took 15.7 percent of the vote, as compared to 22.6 percent in 2004 – a fall in support whose size was magnified by the decline in turnout – from 37.6 to 34 percent. Thus, the number who actually voted for the party fell from 3,718,683 to 2,381,760, a loss of well over one third. Meanwhile, the Conservatives (obtaining 4,198,394 as compared to 4,397,090 in 2004) and the Liberal Democrats (obtaining 2,080,613 as compared to 2,452,327 in 2004) also lost.

In the second place, the fall-out from the expenses row placed Gordon Brown’s role as party leader and therefore as prime minister under very serious pressure with an intensification of the calls upon him to resign that had begun to make themselves heard a year earlier as the Conservative opinion-poll lead, established at the end of 2007, moved into double figures. In Italy, by contrast, the controversy surrounding Berlusconi had

little or no impact either on his own ratings or those of his government: Figure 3.

Finally, the expenses row prompted a wide-ranging debate on reform of the political system that went well beyond the issue of expenses itself and led the Committee on Standards in Public Life to accelerate its investigation of the system for MPs' reimbursements leading, in November, to detailed proposals for reform (while huge majorities agreed that 'MPs named and shamed in the newspapers over their expense claims should be forced to stand down from parliament', [www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/dailypolitics/andrewneil/images/pollmay09.pdf](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/dailypolitics/andrewneil/images/pollmay09.pdf)). By contrast, the same period in Italy saw no similar reform proposals or pressure for proposals, but, rather, the opposite; for it was marked by a huge public row involving the Prime Minister, the President and all the major political parties, thanks to the Constitutional Court's rejection of the *lodo Alfano* granting immunity from prosecution to the holders of the four highest offices of state, including the Prime Minister. Though the law was widely perceived as an *ad personam* initiative driven solely by Berlusconi's desire to use it to solve his own personal legal difficulties, more (44 percent) saw the Court's decision as 'a political attack on Silvio Berlusconi' than viewed it as 'a fair sentence on a bad provision': 41 percent ([www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/italians\\_split\\_on\\_decision\\_to\\_scrap\\_alfano\\_law/](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/italians_split_on_decision_to_scrap_alfano_law/)).

### **Why the difference?**

We can begin to appreciate why two otherwise rather similar episodes could nevertheless have such contrasting impacts when we bear in mind that '*scandals are struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake*' (Thompson, 2000: 245, italics in original). Since scandals involve allegations of wrong-doing of one kind or another, they necessarily throw a question mark over the trustworthiness of those involved in them and this threatens their reputations as persons of honesty and integrity. Reputation of this kind is a vital source of symbolic power – the capacity to produce outcomes through the production and transmission of symbolic forms (Thompson, 2000: 246) – since it enables those who possess it to achieve goals they would simply be unable to achieve without it: as Thompson (2000: 248), notes, a second-hand car dealer, for instance, finds that a reputation as a trustworthy trader is his or her most crucial asset. Reputations are time-consuming and arduous to establish but very quick and easy to lose so that struggles over reputation, of the kind involved in scandals, can be expected to be intense. This means that the resources that can be mobilised on either side, in a scandal, come to be of crucial significance.

In the final analysis the decisive resource, in the case of a scandal, is the support of public opinion whose distribution and nature will be influenced by the other material and non-material resources at the disposal of the protagonists. Thus, it should not be assumed, when a public figure is accused of wrong-doing, that the outcome must necessarily be one of universal condemnation. Rather, the extent and the substance of this attitude are variables. They constitute the terrain over which symbolic power struggles take place because they are complex. For example, the attitude we take towards one accused of wrong-doing, and their alleged action, will depend, among other things, on

our perception of the accuser; their motives in making the allegation, and how believable the allegations are. Our attitude will also depend on our perception of: the alleged wrong doer; their motives in acting the way they supposedly did; the extent to which they could have acted differently; the repercussions of their action, and so forth. From the point of view, then, of the distribution and content of public attitudes and of the extent to which these could be influenced by those at the centre of the two episodes we have described, the episodes themselves were very different.

In terms of the distribution of attitudes, the allegations surrounding Berlusconi certainly provoked widespread feelings of condemnation and were certainly accompanied by the public articulation of opprobrious discourse, but public opinion on the matter seems to have been much more divided than it was in the case of the expenses scandal. While condemnation of the MPs' behaviour was more or less universal,<sup>1</sup> with 75 percent believing that the present system of governing Britain needs a lot of improving according to the Ipsos MORI poll cited above, 66 percent of Italians were apparently unmoved by the revelations concerning Berlusconi, saying in May that their view of him had not changed following the news related to his possible divorce ([www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/italians\\_assess\\_berlusconi\\_after\\_divorce\\_row](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/italians_assess_berlusconi_after_divorce_row)).

In looking to account for this difference, one's thoughts are drawn to the content of attitudes and, therefore, to the fact that in the Berlusconi case but not in the case of the MPs, the affair had partisan implications. We know that individuals' prior political predispositions act as filters and frames through which they process and perceive new information and that partly for this reason, the extent to which corruption scandals may cost votes, for example, is highly variable (Jiménez and Caínzos, 2006). So it was reasonable to suppose that in the Italian case, the electoral fall-out from the affair might be quite minimal – an expectation that is, moreover, reinforced by what we know, or think we know, about the more general attitudes of Berlusconi supporters. First, widespread diffidence towards public officials, scepticism of their impartiality, and therefore admiration for individuals able to gain advantage by 'working the system' render voters indifferent to Berlusconi's conflicts of interest and to accusations that he abuses his public position for his private advantage: 'He's not stupid! And being rich already, he won't steal from us'. Second, his success in selling himself as the authentic voice of the people, as the successful outsider who can right the wrongs supposedly visited on ordinary people by professional politicians, makes it possible, not to say likely, that his gaffes and faux pas are studied rather than chance occurrences, serving, as has the recent discussion of his alleged personal and sexual improprieties, to lend credibility to the populist message by conveying the idea that though endowed with extraordinary qualities, he is also human like the rest of us. Third, these attitudes have been heavily influenced by the entrepreneur's repeated portrayal of himself, predating the scandal, as the victim of a witch hunt – whether on the part of partisan newspaper editors or left-wing public prosecutors, determined to abuse their positions to discredit him and thereby

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<sup>1</sup> According to the BBC poll cited above, the proportion believing that MPs named and shamed over expenses should be forced to stand down was 64 percent. The fact that this was not higher probably says more about people's willingness of forgive and their attitudes to punishment than it does about their condemnation of the behaviour as such.

score a political victory that they have been unable to score, democratically, through the ballot box. In this way, Berlusconi manages to draw upon and to reinforce, widespread anti-political attitudes and thus successfully to defend himself thanks to the great paradox such attitudes embody. This is the paradox that having provided the basis for the great *Tangentopoli* scandal at the beginning of the 1990s, these same attitudes have made consequential reform well nigh impossible because they have provided the basis for an escalation of institutional tensions between judicial and political spheres which Berlusconi has been able to take advantage of by claiming that the various charges of corruption and false accounting that have been brought against him are the work of biased prosecutors driven by the desire to damage him for political reasons. Finally, supporters are relatively indifferent to allegations of impropriety against Berlusconi because identifying with a personality like him enables them symbolically to share in the wealth and opulence he represents and to feel that in however small a way they too have been successful.

In all these respects, the expenses saga was a very different affair. Since MPs from all parties were involved, it had none of the partisan implications of the Berlusconi scandal so that, though it too was driven by widespread anti-political sentiments, MPs were quite unable to draw upon them to frame the accusations against them as part of a broader struggle between left and right. Consequently, in radical contrast to Berlusconi, they were the ‘victims’ of these attitudes, not their master. Nor, needless to say, could individual MPs draw upon anything like the resources available to Berlusconi – whether through his position as head of the executive or as a media magnate – to keep his reputation intact. Thus, though many MPs tried to defend themselves, they were never able to go on the offensive, and the impression was always the one created by Tory MP, Nadine Dorries, who, in a BBC interview, said, ‘MPs are all human beings and they do not deserve to be treated like this’ (BBC News Channel, 22 May 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8063005.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8063005.stm)). In other words, the impression was always that they were taking a last stand.

Finally, then, comparison of the two episodes suggests that the broader political culture and institutional contexts will be important in shaping the impact and outcome of a scandal. The anti-political sentiments that played such a central role in the unfolding of the two scandals are widespread in both countries; but in the one case they have led to detailed reform proposals and the likelihood that the increasingly in-depth specification of what is acceptable on the part of those in positions of public trust will continue. The reasons, we would suggest lie in the particular form that anti-political sentiments take in the UK. One can argue on the basis of available survey data<sup>2</sup> that bluntly, the British are unreasonably strict in what they expect of public officials’ conduct. On the one hand people expect senior office holders to act as role models for them, exemplifying much higher standards than those they would tolerate in others – but then they show a level of cynicism about how the office holders actually behave that appears to be mainly a function of lack of familiarity with their work: as soon they are asked to reflect on groups ‘closer to home’ (such as their local MPs as opposed to MPs in general), exaggeratedly negative perceptions disappear. In this context, reform proposals and legislative

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<sup>2</sup> Such as that gathered by the Standards Committee in 2003 and 2005: see Newell, 2008, for details.

initiatives have the appearance of attempts to assuage public opinion by measures designed to improve standards but of ever growing complexity. In Italy, by contrast, anti-political sentiments express and are fuelled less by anger and demands that things must change, than they are by resignation and scepticism about the possibilities for change. Sustained by widespread negative views of the country's institutions of government and their performance (ultimately deriving from the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Italian state in 1861) these outlooks foster the *arte di arrangiarsi* and the search for solutions of an individualistic rather than a collective kind. Consequently, major reform efforts are less frequently forthcoming.

## Conclusion

It is an open question whether the British or the Italian outlooks are to be preferred. If Italy really is a polity in which public confidence in the effective and impartial operation of public institutions is perhaps lower than in some other western European countries, then it might also be true to say that awareness of the divergence between formal and actual rules, and the consequent willingness to regard law and its enforcement as something negotiable, betokens precisely the high degree of tolerance which Almond and Verba (1963) among others have claimed is so essential for healthy democratic living. Meanwhile, though such a state of affairs might also be potentially destructive of social capital, it might be that responding to scandal and attempting to deal with issues of trust by ever increasing regulation of the kind seen in Britain since the early 1990s is likewise destructive of it. A proliferation of rules and a narrowing of the boundaries of discretion discourage people from using their judgement and taking personal responsibility for their conduct; they may increase the likelihood of misconduct through a multiplication of the rules there to be broken, and the opportunities for the launching of vexatious complaints. All of this might then increase the likelihood of public outcry given the 'increasing disengagement of the media in reporting on politics as an activity rather than focussing on scandals and personalities' (Doig, 2004: 448). This, as the recent activities and reports of the Standards Committee suggest, might then give rise to demands that perceived gaps in the integrity system be plugged – resulting in further reform, and a further twist to the circle.<sup>3</sup>

However this may be, it is clear that we now have a research agenda. Our consideration of the MPs' expenses and the Berlusconi scandals has suggested that the extent to which a political scandal has impacts of consequence for those touched by them and for the polity is likely to depend upon

- the positions occupied by the 'accused' and the 'accusers';
- their number;

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<sup>3</sup> For example, having persuaded Parliament, in the 1990s, to reform itself through acceptance of its recommendations for a code of conduct, a Commissioner and more detailed rules on the declaration of interests, the Committee on Standards has, on more than one occasion since, reviewed the reforms, each time proposing amendment. See, for example, its sixth report and its eighth report available through its web site, <http://www.public-standards.gov.uk/>

- the nature of public attitudes towards the ‘accused’ and the ‘accuser(s)’ and towards the transgressions alleged to have taken place;
- the distribution of such attitudes;
- the resources available to ‘accused’ persons to defend their reputations by influencing public attitudes;
- the characteristics of the broader political culture informing such attitudes.

It now remains for further research to assess the relative importance of these variables by means of comparative research based on large-N studies.

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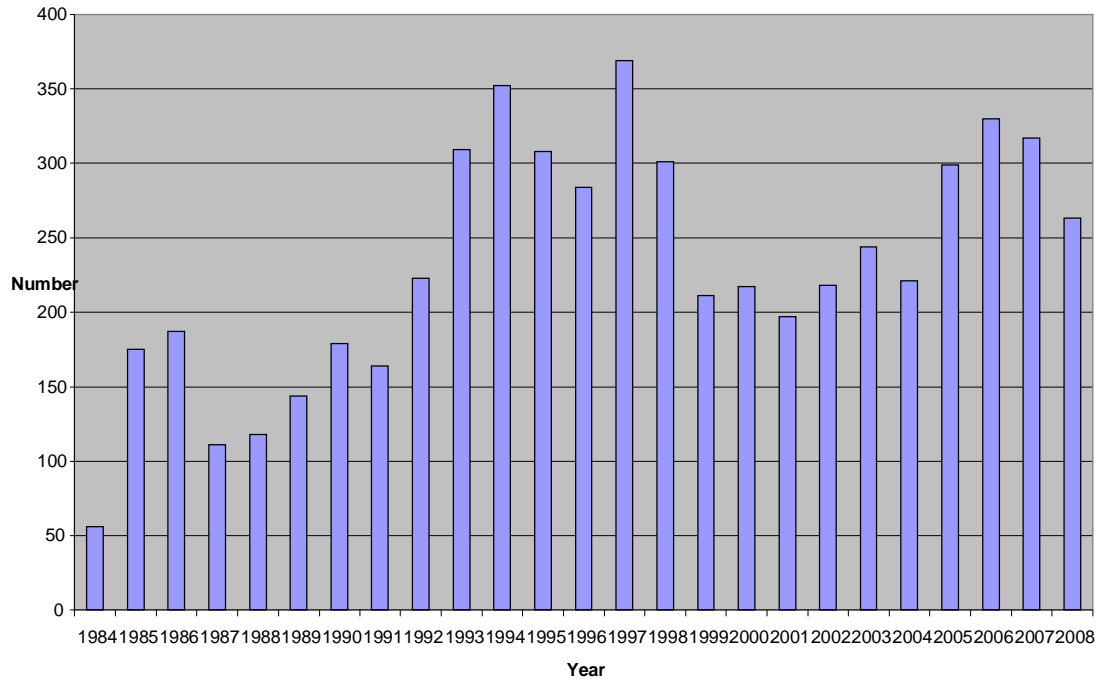
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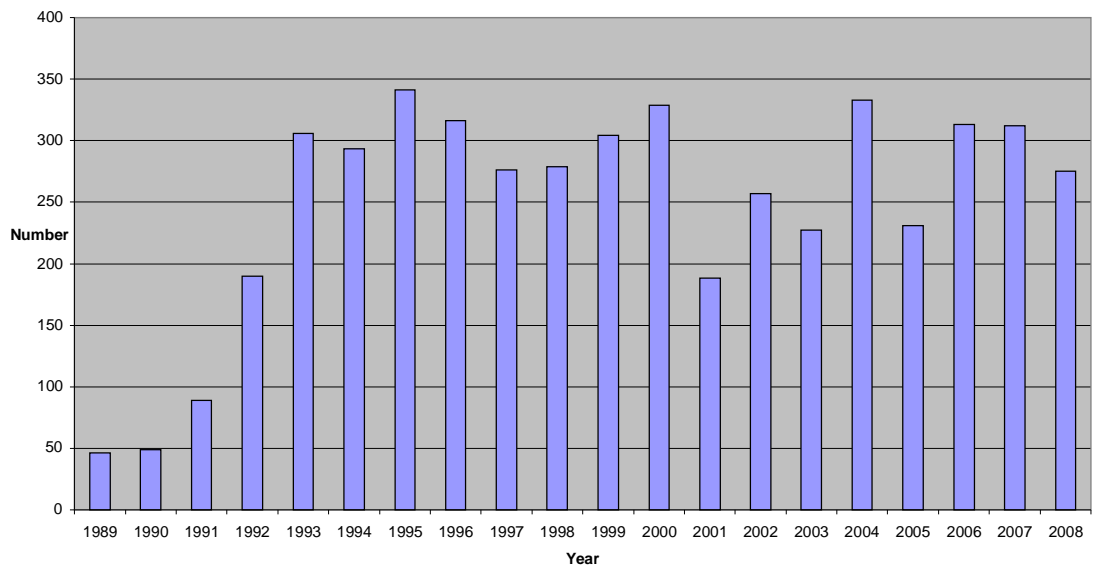
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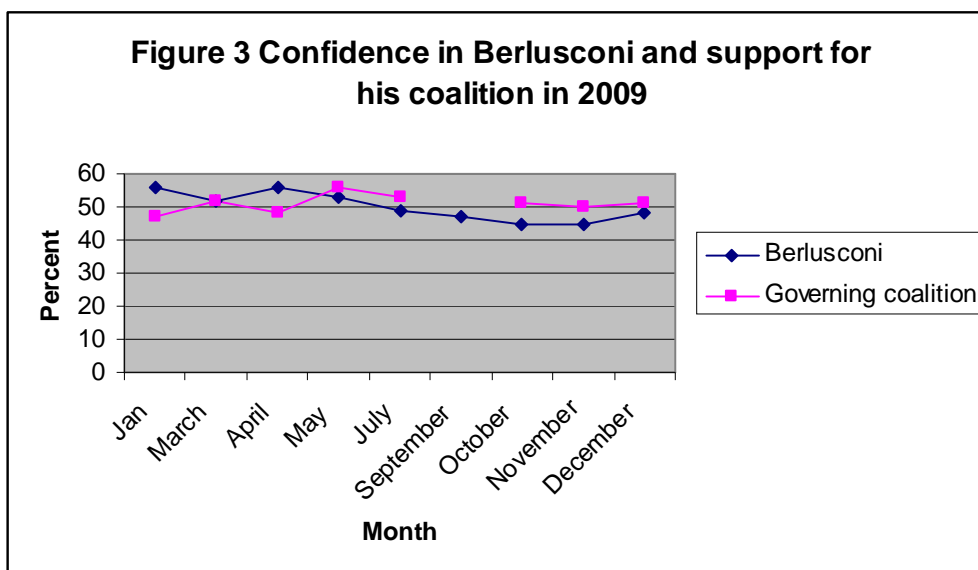
**Figure 1 Guardian headlines containing the roots 'corrupt' or 'bribe' or 'embezzle' or 'fraud' or 'sleaze'**



**Figure 2 Headlines containing the roots 'corrupt' or 'bribe' or 'embezzle' or 'fraud' or 'sleaze' in The Age (Melbourne), The Jerusalem Post, the Irish Times**







Source: Angus Reid Global Monitor: Silvio Berlusconi, <http://www.angus-reid.com/issue/C49/P0/>

Note: 'Berlusconi' = percentage expressing confidence in Silvio Berlusconi; 'Governing coalition' = percentage naming one of the governing parties in response to the question, 'If the national political election were held today, which party would you vote for?'