



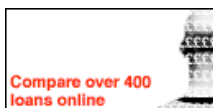
Italian MPs vote to kill off Berlusconi bribery trial

Sophie Arie in Rome
Thursday June 19, 2003
[The Guardian](#)

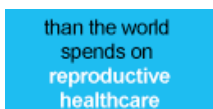
Italian legislators voted last night to pass an immunity law that will save the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi from prosecution for as long as he is prime minister.

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Deputies in the lower house of parliament approved a legal amendment proposed by Mr Berlusconi himself less than two months ago, which would protect Italy's five highest-ranking officials from trial while in office.



The legislation, rushed through at breakneck speed, brings to an abrupt halt Mr Berlusconi's trial in Milan on charges of corruption - he is accused of bribing judges in a 1980s corporate takeover battle before he entered politics - just days before Italy takes over the EU presidency.



The trial could resume when Mr Berlusconi is no longer in power but commentators say that is unlikely.



The prime minister argued that the change in the law was necessary to protect the country from what he described as the "communist threat" posed by prosecuting judges.

The leftwing opposition has been up in arms about the move, which they see as anti-constitutional and a blow to Italian democracy.

"All this has been done, not to protect the five top state officials but to protect the accused, Berlusconi," said Piero Fassino, the leader of the Democrats of the Left.

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Mr Berlusconi seemed to confirm the suspicions of his critics when he declared during a dramatic court appearance on Tuesday: "One citizen is equal to another [in the eyes of the law] but perhaps this one is slightly more equal than the rest, given that 50% of Italians have given him the responsibility of governing the country."

Parliamentary immunity was abolished in the early 1990s after the "clean hands" corruption trials which purged Italy's old political and business classes.

Many legislators preferred to reintroduce the law rather than risk a constitutional crisis should the prime minister be convicted during Italy's six-month EU presidency.

But commentators warned that while the law might save Mr Berlusconi from the embarrassment of a public trial, it left him, in the eyes of the rest of the world, a lame duck prime minister.

"By making sure he does not stand trial, Berlusconi has not cleared his name. It looks as though he is trying to hide," said James Walston, a political scientist at the American University of Rome.

Milan prosecutors are still pressing for an 11-year prison sentence for his co-accused, Cesare Previti, Mr Berlusconi's close ally and former defence minister, for his part in allegedly bribing judges to win the privatisation contract for state food giant SME.

Yesterday it was reported that an envelope containing white powder had been sent to Ilda Boccassini, the chief prosecutor in the corruption trial.

A note inside said: "You think you are fighting Berlusconi and instead you are ruining the image of Italy and the Italians. For now, take this anthrax and if it is not enough I will blow up the whole tribunal building."

The note claimed to be from the Nuclei Combattenti, a revolutionary Marxist group, but investigators said it was not clear who had sent the letter. The white powder was sent to a Milan hospital for tests.

Trial or no trial, Mr Berlusconi seems set for a difficult term leading the EU. His most recent diplomatic forays have not helped to calm post-Iraq war

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tensions.

On a Middle East peace mission last week he reportedly told the Israeli leader Ariel Sharon he was "proud to have been Israel's most decided, sincere and close friend", but defied recent European policy by refusing to meet Yasser Arafat. France expressed its concern, leading Mr Berlusconi to retort: "France has missed a good opportunity to stay quiet."

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