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Inaugural Lecture of Biennale Democracy 2013, "Utopian. Possible? "

Teatro Regio, Turin

Chairman Zagrebelsky, honoured guests, dear friends,

If there is one word to which the history of humanity is greatly indebted, a word to which I, too, have been indebted both in the course of my working life and now in the office that it is my honour to hold, that word is Utopia.

This is because Utopia narrates doubt. And politics – devoid of doubt - would be a mere photographic still, an exercise in vanity, or an act of solitude.

Utopia is synonymous with quest. That is to say, facing our limitations, approaching them with respect and reserve, and never with fear. Embracing change, a challenge which is also the highest promise of democracy.

Utopia is synonymous with journey: the urge to set out, quit our safe havens and look beyond the horizon. For, as the Greek poet Kavafis wrote, starting a journey is what matters: “ ... as you set out for Ithaca wish for your road to be long, full of adventure, full of discovery...”

Without this demanding but stimulating condition, without the Utopia of the next journey, what would have become of our history? Without the duty to pursue Utopia, how could we ever have imagined that one day the president of the most important nation in the world would be the son of an African?

That the journey of my life should lead me to becoming the President of the Chamber of Deputies is perhaps also the fruit of the many quietly but firmly held utopias I have been striving to articulate for more than twenty years: the right of the least, the weakest and the persecuted not to be forever left behind, not to be forever victims; the thirst for hope and life of those who have embarked on a journey without knowing whether they would reach their destination. I am thinking of the crossings of hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees to whom every day the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations try to restore dignity and hope for the future.

To be sure, history teaches us that Utopia is often a heresy in politics. Yet, what Utopia could be more necessary today than a vision of Italy as a country in which rights, equality and civic dignity finally become definite notions, acknowledged rules and respected principles?

We live in times that are far from equitable. In today's world 1% of people own 40% of the planet's resources. The three richest people in the world have the same economic

weight as the poorest 600 million human beings. Nor do we need to look too far from home: the assets of the ten wealthiest Italians equal those of the poorest eight million.

If politics fails to rise to the challenge of healing these civilizational wounds, if we prove incapable of addressing the urgent and reachable Utopia of a more equitable country and a more equitable world, what sense is there in talking of “good politics”?

The current crisis has had tragic repercussions on people's lives, and yet, its very harshness has forced us to develop a new vocabulary for and understanding of our political and social life. The crisis is compelling us to close the gap between Utopia and Possibility.

I shall mention just three examples from the many that the national and international context has to offer.

First, the issue of military spending, where, until a few years ago, in Italy at least, criticism was confined to pacifist circles. Today, the demand for a reduction in military spending is far more widespread, so much so that in recent months different political forces supporting the government have vied to claim credit for the more sizable cuts. Why this change? Because the economic crisis has forced us to look differently at military spending. A debate that until recently was regarded as "ideological" seems to have reached a crossroads: do you want more fighter-bombers, or should the money go into social security? The Utopia of a world with fewer weapons has finally been stripped of all abstraction and has turned into a focused discourse on alternative allocations for public funds.

Second example. The debate about the banking system. For a long time, criticism of speculative finance has been the preserve of groups viewed as being radically opposed to the capitalist system. Here again, the crisis has overturned previously held convictions. Today, it is natural to demand that the banks revert to their job of supporting businesses and households, just as it is natural to condemn financial speculation that in the blink of an eye can push a country and its citizens to the brink of disaster.

Third example. The environment. Those who dared criticise the prevailing model of development and campaigned for curbs on the unfettered consumption of land, unregulated building speculation and the monetisation of nature, even at the cost of its disfigurement, were regarded as being on the wrong side of history. In this case, it was the glaring devastation of Italy rather than the economic crisis that opened our eyes. The protection of our landscape is not based on some bucolic dream of returning to Arcadia: rather, it is the only realistically feasible model of development in a country such as ours that has extraordinary environmental wealth. The presumed Utopia of environmentally sustainable development has turned out to be the best road to recovery.

By the same token, was it not considered utopian until only a few months ago to try to tackle the cost of our political system, which is what I am trying to do now as President of the Chamber of Deputies? My first action was to reduce significantly the salary and privileges assigned to me. The second one was to call on Deputies holding parliamentary

offices to do likewise. Their response has been positive, and we shall continue on this path.

Believe me, I am not doing this as an easy means of garnering consensus, nor just for the cost savings. I am doing it because, at a difficult time for Italian families when so many are forced to make sacrifices and cutbacks to the very limit of their abilities, especially institutions and politicians must send an unequivocal signal of rigour and transparency.

If I had ever had any doubts about the need for rigour and restraint, the tragedy of Civitanova Marche would surely have swept them away.

Romeo Dionisi, Anna Maria Sopranzi and her brother Giuseppe, three decent and honest people, found themselves having to bear the material and moral weight of their poverty alone.

Death at the hands of poverty and wounded dignity is an intolerable injustice!

When someone takes their own life because of suddenly becoming unbearably poor, and when even the right to hope is denied – as has been the case far too often in Italy – it means that our society no longer has adequate social security nets. It means that the prevailing idea is that poverty is something of which to be ashamed; the cynical idea that if you are poor it is your own fault, because you are not good, shrewd or crafty enough, and because you clearly don't know how to stand up for yourself unlike those who boast about their wealth, no matter its provenance. For is it not true that many, too many, in Italy think like this?

Yet the quality of a person cannot be inferred from his or her income.

Yet, engraved in the quintessential spirit of our Republic is Article 3 of the Constitution, which is my lodestar.

Let us re-read it together: "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove the economic and social obstacles which by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country."

This article not only reminds us that we are all equal, it also tells us that the Republic should remove the obstacles that prevent people from fulfilling their potential and participating in the life of the country. The Republic is not an abstract entity: it is us, it is you, it is our institutions, our political and social forces, our schools, universities and our places of work and production.

Unfortunately, inequalities have increased, not decreased in recent years. The current crisis has multiplied and exacerbated the obstacles that need to be removed. I was put in mind of Article 3 when I read some data released a few weeks ago, according to which 57,000 students have dropped out of Italian universities over the past ten years. This

number, more dramatically than any other, indicates how hollow-sounding the promise of equality must seem to our young people, a promise which we, their parents, had once considered credible.

Mr Chairman, the last thing I could ever have imagined just a month ago is that I would be appointed to such a high office, which I am honoured to hold. After my initial surprise and – why pretend – fear, I tried to focus all my energy on a mission that I consider an absolute priority, namely, to do my part to help repair the badly frayed relationship between the citizens and institutions of this country.

I thought I needed to take seriously the deep current of criticism of political parties and politics in the country. You will never hear me dismissing popular criticism as "anti-politics". Not because I am blind to the dangers of authoritarian and illiberal populism – it is, unfortunately, to be found everywhere in Europe, but because the demand for transparency and honesty is not inimical to good politics. On the contrary, transparency and honesty are its very essence. We are not talking about a frivolous protest, but about a sense of general disgust at corruption, the squandering of public money and the vulgar and ostentatious display of power.

I, too, demand transparency. I, too, am intolerant of dishonest gain. This is why, in the first weeks of my Presidency, I sent a clear signal to the public and the political parties, by presenting my credentials as one who was determined to make the institutions of state seem less remote, and to promote the idea of Parliament as a "house of good politics".

This is also, however, the moment to make it clear that the idea of "cost-free" politics is a negative Utopia. It is a vision that we need to stop hankering after, even if it still attracts considerable media support. Politics cannot be depicted solely or mainly as a cost-cutting competition. It is a trite fallacy to count how many Euros are "squandered" at every parliamentary session, as if the exchange of competing arguments and the painstaking exploration of major issues were a mere waste of time and money.

Similarly, I am not persuaded by another simplification that has become very fashionable, to the effect that politics should be exclusively funded by private individuals. Make no mistake, I strongly feel the need for more stringent rules than those now in place, but I continue to believe that having generous donors ought not to be a pre-condition for taking part in the democratic process. Good politics, in my view, consists in the responsible discharge of one's duties while remaining above all free from controlling influences.

A necessary Utopia to which we should devote serious attention is, I believe, fostering an increasingly far-reaching participation of citizens in politics, also using the tools of the Internet. In spite of the crisis of social and political representation, political participation in Italian society remains vibrant. And tonight we shall be paying rightful homage to an artist who, more than any other, has shown us the indissoluble bond between participation and freedom.

Participation is what makes us committed citizens, consistent with the design of our Constitution, while powerful and all-pervasive economic and media forces in our societies

would have us and, especially, our young people, become “consumers on permanent duty”, whose citizenship amounts to little more than slotting a vote into the ballot box.

The Internet offers great scope for new forms of knowledge and involvement, but I am not attracted by the allegedly direct democracy that works according to the "one screen, one vote" rule.

Much can be done to strengthen the tools of parliamentary democracy by closing the gap that separates representatives from the people they represent. I hope that the bill to reinforce citizens' legislative initiatives will soon be brought to the Floor of the House.

So far, citizens' initiatives have not produced significant results. All too often in the past, proposals signed by at least fifty-thousand people were left to gather dust on the shelves of Parliament, as they failed to secure any fast-track treatment. We must commit ourselves to changing the Rules of Procedure to make a prompt parliamentary consideration of bills signed by a sufficient number of citizens mandatory, and to ensure that their promoters can follow directly the different stages of their passage through Parliament.

To the same end, I am going to promote a "listening campaign" in the Chamber of Deputies. It will consist of a coming-together of social, economic and cultural actors who are representative of the issues most keenly felt by civil society. Our "house of good politics" will open its doors to those who work every day to find solutions to our problems. I would like this opening-up of our Parliament to take place in parallel with legislative activity, in a productive interplay based on the established instruments of parliamentary committee hearings.

We must strive to re-establish a fruitful, forceful and loyal relationship with Europe. I am referring to Europe as conceived in the Ventotene Manifesto, an extraordinary and precious Utopia fashioned in the harsh exile imposed by Fascism. In those unhappy days, Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi, rowing against the tide, recognised that the only remedy to dictatorships and wars was a large-scale European federalist project. We need to pick up the gauntlet of that challenge after years of backsliding and disengagement. We need to restore Italy's sense of pride in campaigning for a United States of Europe. A Europe of rights, opportunity and equal dignity. A Europe of which our children, whether born in Palermo or Berlin, feel they are full citizens. A Europe that knows how to treat solidarity and social cohesion not as items of expenditure but, rather, as the highest priorities of its political action. A Europe that knows how to defend and renew its welfare system, rightly described as "the most extraordinary invention of social engineering of the past 150 years."

We want a Europe that sets public goods - the founding values of any democracy - at the heart of its institutional and civil architecture: goods such as air, water, the environment, culture, knowledge. Yet in Italy, public assets have often been sold out, neglected, or dented in the name of profit. We are among the European countries that invest least in culture and education. We are also, however, a country that, through a referendum, was able to secure the inviolability of the public water supply and ensure it remained a collective asset: a resource for all, contributing to the dignity of each and everyone.

That referendum and the one million four hundred thousand signatures that accompanied it were a sign of healthy collective outrage. Salvatore Settis is quite correct to write that to keep hope alive and give it shape we must cultivate our indignation, and not turn it off as if it had to do with the past only. Here, too, I strongly feel a call of duty for the political world and its institutions. We have to free people from their sense of routine resignation and make them aware that the full exercise of citizenship entails participating, proposing, choosing, deciding and overseeing. This is a truth that none of us can gainsay.

In conclusion, let me say this. At its highest and most perfect form, democracy itself appears as Utopia. So how could we shirk this challenge knowing that the daily journal of any democracy is written on the life pages of millions of hardworking women and men? Taking care of those lives and watching over those labours is not Utopia: rather, it is a sign of good politics, whether at the seat of our Parliament or in the remotest village in Africa.

Think of Kogelo, just a dot on the map of Kenya, a group of houses sitting on the equator. In the nineteen-fifties a man left this village: his son is now the president of the United States of America.

This, my friends, is what our wise Utopia looks like.

I ask you to lay aside cynicism and dare to hope! Fly high, do not be afraid! Do not be afraid to gaze upon the things of this world. Reclaim the dream, the values of solidarity, equality and human dignity. These principles are not merely worthy-sounding words: they are the harbinger of the life to come. Of responsible politics. Of accomplished democracy.