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## **The rise of Laura Boldrini bodes well for Italy's political class. They need more of her ilk**

Yet her decision to stand for parliament unleashed a tidal wave of sexist hostility



When I was this paper's correspondent in Rome, Laura Boldrini was a treasure. Once or twice a month, sometimes far more frequently, leaky boats crammed with migrants from Africa and beyond limped into the harbour of Lampedusa, or were rescued and towed into port by the Coast Guard.

If there were storms very often the boats would sink and the Coast Guard and the UN refugee agency would have the task of recovering and counting and disposing of the bodies. It was a relentlessly depressing and repetitive news story about which it was hard not to become jaded. But Boldrini, who worked for the UN for 20 years, for many of them as spokesperson for the UNHCR, never grew jaded or cynical or dismissive. She was empathy incarnate. She always knew exactly what was going on, was always available for interview on her mobile. I never had cause to doubt that she was totally committed to the welfare of the thousands of poor people washing up on Italy's doorstep every year.

So I was delighted and amazed when, one year ago, following her election as an MP with the Left Ecology Freedom party, she was pulled from the ranks of novice parliamentarians and promoted to Speaker of the Camera, the lower house. Delighted because commitment of Laura's sort is precious in any sphere of life; amazed because in the Italian system the

speakers of the two houses are, along with the President of the Republic, the three senior-most officials in the land and the jobs normally go to very senior politicians with long careers behind them. It was great to see her get the recognition, but it did not seem exactly the sort of recognition she merited.

In the next week or two that situation may well change for the better. Italy is in the middle of an old-fashioned power struggle between centre-left factions, with the young pretender, Florence Mayor Matteo Renzi, predicted to oust his Democratic party colleague Enrico Letta as prime minister some time soon. So far so normal: only the Berlusconi anomaly, it seems, interrupted the tendency of Italian governments to lead short, intense lives. Mr Renzi is fancied by many who know him as the most exciting new face to emerge for a long time, with the freshness and drive to break Italy's long weary cycle of stagnation and decline. We shall see. Hope springs eternal.

This week he let it be known that, if he does form a government, Laura Boldrini will be in it. That is a good thing. It would be the strongest way to send the message that he is in the business of changing ethics, not merely faces.

Italian politics has been dogged for as long as anyone can remember by a sense of caste entitlement, symbolised by the huge salaries and expenses and pension arrangements, the swollen fleet of oversize blue Lancias at politicians' beck and call, the pervading sense that having got elected they are beyond the reach of the *hoi polloi*. That mentality has been under siege for a long time, but as in Britain it takes a lot of shifting. The 25 per cent of the electorate who voted for comedian Beppe Grillo's Five-Star Movement were protesting above all against the political caste. Likewise a generation ago the notherners who put Umberto Bossi and the Northern League in Parliament, with the slogan "big thief Rome". Yet Bossi and his crew succumbed to Rome's blandishments in the end.

With a woman as passionate and honest as Laura Boldrini involved as a minister, with her wide knowledge of the larger world and her vivid understanding of Italy's moral failings, the new government would have a good claim to be making a fresh start. But there is no point in pretending it would be easy for Boldrini herself.

Her decision to stand for parliament last year unleashed a tidal wave of sexist hostility against her: threats, insults, vile images. Her sudden promotion to Speaker brought out the sarcasm in her political adversaries, who addressed her with exaggerated formality as "signor presidente" (a handle to which she is entitled). But the real aggression began when she recently used her authority to cut short a filibuster by the comedian Grillo's party. The comment section of the blog which is Grillo's main portal to the world filled up with insults and violent threats. She received photos of herself pasted onto the image of a woman being raped. Grillo himself, supposed godfather of a brave new world of cyber democracy, posted a video on the blog with the title, "What would you do alone in a car with Boldrini?"

Vulgar abuse and menaces and innuendo of this sort bring home how much damage Silvio Berlusconi has done to Italy's moral fibre. Grillo and Berlusconi are worlds apart politically, but Grillo is heir to the latter's ugly macho bravado. By filling his party up with topless models and wannabe starlets, Berlusconi's reductive view of women and their role became the Italian norm. Angela Merkel, Europe's most powerful leader, was dismissed as "an unfuckable lard arse." Politicians whose looks were not their strong suit were relentlessly sneered at. Even Margaret Thatcher, whom Berlusconi admired, he insulted in sexual terms. The bizarre world-view of this pathetic lothario insinuated itself everywhere.

Giving Laura Boldrini a senior ministerial post would send the strongest imaginable signal that at last the times are changing.