

# Symbolism in politics – Italian style

Wise politicians know how to use symbolism. Winston Churchill posed with a tommy gun in 1940, Ronald Reagan wore a cowboy hat and Neville Chamberlain – less successfully – had a piece of paper.

So what was Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi doing with symbolism when he made his somewhat rambling resignation speech yesterday evening? Behind him were three very obvious things:

- 1 – The flag of Italy
- 2 – The flag of the European Union
- 3 – A mural by the great Renaissance painter Raphael.

The two flags are straightforward enough. Renzi was Prime Minister of Italy, a member state of the European Union. Both flags were of the same size, both on upright staffs and both of the same height. That means that neither was given precedence over the other. Of course, the flag of the EU should take precedence as it is a supranational organisation of which Italy is a mere part. But in the world of smoke-and-mirrors that is the EU it would never do to admit that. The pretence is made that member states are still democratic and independent. EU trickery and obfuscation, nothing new there.

No, it was the painting by Raphael that caught my eye. The picture in question is *“The Meeting between Leo the Great and Attila”*. This masterpiece of Renaissance art depicts a key historic event that took place in 452. Attila, ruler of the barbaric Huns, had spent the previous 12 years butchering his way around Europe, and now he was marching on Rome. Pope Leo I led a trembling delegation north to meet Attila. Against all

odds, Leo persuaded Attila withdraw back over the Alps. Rome was saved from the barbarians.

So what can we read into this?

Was Renzi seeking to portray himself as a latter day Pope Leo, seeking to save Italy from the northern barbarians? If so, he might have been casting the big German banks in the role of Attila – not the first time that Germans have been likened to Huns. After all, it is largely the need to stick to German inspired fiscal measures that has got the Italian economy – and its banks – into the mess that they are in. Or was the EU itself being likened to the Huns?

Unlikely, I think. Renzi is a creature of the EU. He was raised up to implement its policies and now has been cast down as a result.

Perhaps Renzi was seeking to liken his constitutional reforms to that previous great turning point in Italian history. If so, it was an unfortunate analogy. Rome was saved from the Huns, but it fell to the Germanic barbarians soon after.

Actually, I think any symbolism to be found here lies in the fact that the historic allusions were ignored.

That is typical of Renzi and of the EU. They were seeking to change radically the Italian constitution so that they could ram through highly controversial measures that would have brought the Italian banking system and finances even more into line with EU diktat than they already are.

They ignored the historic reasons why Italy has the rather unwieldy constitution that it does. Those who drew it up in 1947 wanted to achieve two things. They wanted to make it impossible for any single person again to wield the sort of power that Benito Mussolini had achieved under the old constitution. They also sought to reflect the identities and powers of regions which, within living memory, had been

separate countries while at the same time binding them together into the nation-state of Italy.

This delicate balancing act within the Italian Constitution was to be swept away for the temporary convenience of the EU masters in Brussels and German bankers in Frankfurt.

The constitutional vandalism, disrespect for the past and contempt for the views of the people are typical of the EU – and summed up by Renzi's disdain for the symbolism of the painting behind him.