

NEWS

Comment

Beware of the Precautionary Principle

By Dominic Standish
Special to Italy Daily

As the May 13 general election draws nearer, why are the leading coalitions so unclear about their positions on the precautionary principle when it has increasingly influenced government policy?

Depleted uranium ammunition, mad cow disease, foot-and-mouth disease, and electromagnetic field pollution have all sparked a momentous transformation of the Italian government's approach to handling potential policy controversies.

A widely-used definition of the precautionary principle is included in the 1992 Rio Declaration: "Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation".

This reverses the notion that there should be evidence of a problem before restrictions are imposed in the name of safety.

When it was suggested in January that the deaths of seven Italian soldiers was due to their exposure to DU ammunition while in the Balkans, an unconfident government found that the precautionary principle provided a breathing space.

Defense Minister Sergio Matarrella said scientists, not politicians, should decide if DU is dangerous, but then called for a moratorium on the use of the weapon even before the government's own scientific committee had delivered its verdict on whether health hazards were posed. The eventual answer was no.

The European Commission has been deploying the precautionary principle since 1992, and pressured Italy to do the same in the mad cow crisis that erupted late last year.

Trade bans, testing of cows and restrictions on feeding were imposed before there was any evidence of the disease in Italy. But, as I reported for the online magazine www.spiked-online.com in February, when the first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy was confirmed in an Italian cow, the government rushed through emergency measures as if faced with national disaster.

The sense of panic was palpable as Prime Minister Giuliano Amato tried to reassure consumers of beef's safety while Agriculture Minister Alfonso Pecorella Scario said he would not even trust milk. Beef sales declined and the public was confused.

Still, only 11 confirmed cases of BSE in Italian cows have been confirmed, and no confirmed cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease in Italian humans.

Keeping in mind that there is still no scientific evidence proving a mode of

transmission between BSE in cows and vCJD in humans, it may strike some as strange that a sense of national disaster was the result of 11 sick cows.

But with the precautionary principle in operation, drastic measures require no evidence of a serious risk.

The foot-and-mouth scare indicated that not only is there no need for evidence of a risk, but no restriction can go too far. Although there were no cases of the disease in Italy, the government quickly enacted legislation, limiting livestock movement, banning circus shows, animal fairs and markets and imposing a blockade on the imports of animals susceptible to FM.

The ban on imports went even further than the previous European Union restrictions by including non-EU countries. Once the precautionary principle is accepted, who can argue that too much caution is being applied?

Similarly, in February 2001 Italy became the first European country to pass sweeping legislation on electromagnetic fields, referring to the precautionary principle in EU law in Article One.

The precautionary principle was previously invoked when a decree on EMF was enforced in 1999. Consumer groups have been claiming for years that EMF can cause cancer, especially leukemia, although numerous studies in the U.S., Britain and Scandinavia have concluded that there is little such risk. EMF does not

figure in the International Agency for Research on Cancer's list of 78 certain causes of cancer and 63 other probable, but not definite, causes.

But with the precautionary principle now in full swing, decrees are now to be implemented that will have far-reaching consequences.

Last month, Chicco Testa, the chairman of the state-run electricity utility ENEL, was placed under investigation for EMF pollution in Piedmont. Three Vatican Radio officials face similar charges.

The Holy See has claimed it is outside Italy's jurisdiction, but, faced with government threats to have its power supply cut, has agreed to reduce Vatican Radio's broadcasts.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Umberto Veronesi, a cancer expert of world renown, suggested that the 20 to 30 billion lire it will cost to comply with the new EMF law around Cesano could be better spent than on a crusade to eliminate what he said might be two hypothetical cases of infantile leukemia a year.

A cabinet meeting earlier this month showed that the current government appears divided on whether to wholeheartedly apply the precautionary principle over EMF.

The future implications of the EMF law are not hard to imagine. Italy has 60,000 antennae transmitters for TV and radio, the most in the world and five times the number in the United States. The new

UTMS networks for Italy's avid cell phone-using population are expected to require 55,000 more antennae over seven years.

The precautionary principle approach to EMF is placing limits upon our media and communications of the future without evidence of a serious health risk.

Several ministers have demonstrated that they have learnt how to apply the precautionary principle with rigour. Legislation and decrees have been implemented remarkably quickly over these issues given the Italian political system is not renowned for its efficiency. The conflict of interest bill approved in February took seven years from inception to final passage.

Maybe some politicians have realized that the public is no longer interested in the politics of corruption, the organizing principle of much of Italian politics during the 1990s. Indeed, polls regularly suggest that Italians are more concerned with issues such as crime or health than political conflicts of interest.

As we approach the election, politicians need to make it clear whether the progress of important developments from cloning to transgenic crops will continue to be restricted by the precautionary principle.

Mr. Standish runs Veneto-based Progress Consulting. Comments to him can be addressed to dstandish@europe.com.

Alitalia Denies Imminent Link To Air France

By Christopher Emsden
christopher.emsden@rcs.it

Treasury Minister Vincenzo Visco and Transport Minister Pierluigi Bersani released a joint statement Monday saying that reports of an "imminent" announcement of an alliance between Alitalia and Air France were unfounded.

The statement curbed what began as a soaring day for shares in both carriers. Alitalia rose as much as 9.2 percent before closing up 6.4 percent. Air France rose 4.4 percent before settling back for a 1 percent gain.

Alitalia denied the report and said any decision its state-appointed management made would be screened by the Treasury. Air France declined to comment, noting only that it "had always been favorable toward an accord with the Italian carrier."

The Italian ministers acknowledged that the government had asked Alitalia, which it controls, to seek international alliances, but denied any particular partner was preferred in what has been a drawn-out soap opera littered with headlines that turned out to be wrong.

Rome-based daily La Repubblica's Monday edition quoted Mr. Bersani as saying that Alitalia "privileged" Air France over other potential allies, mainly KLM and SwissAir. The day before, the paper quoted Cabinet Undersecretary Enrico Michele saying a deal with Air France was "basically done" and would be announced in May. Any such deal would have to be reviewed by Alitalia's shareholders, meaning that the government would decide how to vote the Treasury's 53 percent stake. That assembly might not be held until the end of next month, after May 13 general elections usher in a new government.

KLM, the Dutch carrier with which Alitalia was half-married before the relationship went sour last April over the difficult inauguration of Milan's expanded Malpensa international airport, said it "would not be surprised" if La Repubblica's report turned out to be correct.

Rome-based Alitalia has been seeking to exploit the domestic market in wealthy northern Italy, but to little avail as many business travelers prefer rival European carriers who can connect them to long-haul flights at their home hubs.

Analysts say a partner with deeper pockets and broader international flight network could benefit from access to the Italian market in exchange for rescuing Alitalia's balance sheet, which showed net losses of almost 500 billion lire last year.

Whichever airline does that is likely to win significant business from one of Europe's richest regions while Alitalia is expected to focus on long-haul flights to the southern hemisphere.

People

Film critic **Giuglielmo Biraghi** died in Rome Monday morning after a long battle with cancer. He was 73. Director of the Venice Film Festival and an avid collector of sea shells, Biraghi was also one of the founders of the Taormina Film Festival and served on the board of Italy's prestigious Istituto Luce, a cinema heritage and distribution company. During his career, he served as a jury member in many film festivals including ones in Cannes, Los Angeles, Toronto, Berlin and Rotterdam. (ANSA)

Culture Minister **Giovanna Melandri** and her predecessor **Walter Veltroni**, now a candidate for Rome mayor, visited the set of the film "Eye Witness" in Rome's Jewish ghetto neighborhood on Monday. The film, directed by **Costantino Costa-Gavras** is based on a **Rolf Hochhuth** theatrical production about the Vatican's attitude towards Jews during World War II. The two politicians stopped by the Portico d'Otavia shooting site to speak with local Jewish community leaders. "Seeing actors dressed up in SS costumes is a painful sight," said Melandri. (ANSA)

Silvius Magnago, the historic leader of the Südtiroler Volkspartei, the political movement of the German-speaking population around Bolzano, unveiled his "protest" campaign in the proportional quota of the Trentino-Alto Adige district in the May 13 general elections. Magnago, 87, along with many others in the SVP, complaining that the 4 percent cut-off for seats in the proportional quota unjustly preclude Italy's linguistic minorities from sending representatives to Parliament. The party currently has three lower house deputies and two senators, all allied to the center-left coalition. He and **Luis Durnwalder**, president of the province of Bolzano, are both fiercely opposed to the center-right. Despite what many feel is their basic harmony with conservative policies, they accuse the Polo coalition, which includes the right-wing National Alliance, of wanting to revise the area's special autonomies and to introduce "mixed schooling" of German and Italian speakers. The center-right's candidate in Bolzano is **Franco Frattini**.

Ferrari Chairman **Luca Cordero di Montezemolo** and his wife **Ludovica Andreoni** became the proud parents of a baby girl Monday morning. The new-born, named **Guia**, was born at the Villa Regina private clinic in Bologna shortly after 10 A.M., weighing in at 3.1 kilograms. Di Montezemolo and his bride tied the knot last July 7 in a private ceremony outside of Bologna. He is the father of two other children.

Needed: A Bigger Flash Cube

Umberto Guidoni of Italy carries a camera as he enters the International Space Station after a ride up from Earth on the U.S. space shuttle Endeavour. He can also expect a blessing from Pope John Paul II, sent last week and released Monday by the Italian Space Agency. Guidoni, 46, has been in outer space before. This time, he is responsible for the Italian-built Raffaello cargo carrier that was launched to the space station aboard Endeavour.



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lives of millions of people," Mr. Coscioni says. "It is the government's and Parliament's duty to avoid such moral blackmail."

So with his campaign, Mr. Coscioni is actually fighting for his own life — or at least for the right of harboring some hope. "On average," says Antonella Dentamaro of the Radical Party, "people suffer-

ing from this disease live for five years, although Hawking has been ill since 1968."

Mr. Coscioni believes that only running with the maverick Radicals — who after promoting bipolarism for two decades are now refusing to join up with either the center-left or the center-right coalitions — he can expect to obtain some result.



Coscioni was in fine form before he was afflicted by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

"The aim of my presence in the party is to break the conspiracy of silence of the conservatives and the center-left, which damages 10 million Italians suffering from chronic degenerative diseases," he says. "I make people uncomfortable because I don't want to be 'a human case,' but a politician."

In order to make himself heard "despite being mute," as he puts it, Mr. Coscioni is using the traditional methods of the Radicals, who since the 1960s have challenged the political establishment with hunger and thirst strikes, sit-ins in front of government headquarters and other spectacular forms of what they describe as Gandhian-style "passive resistance" techniques.

For his part, Mr. Coscioni — who has appeared on a number of television shows this month — plans to reduce the amount of painkilling drugs he takes starting Thursday night, to protest against the lack of air time he and his party are granted in the media.

At the same time, party leader Emma Bonino will begin a thirst and hunger strike.

Mr. Coscioni says his hope is not so much that the political community will listen, but that ordinary citizens will take note and vote for him. He is running in the proportional quota in three districts, in Lazio, Emilia Romagna and Umbria, and is also a first-past-the-post candidate in the

Orvieto district.

"I trust citizens and I trust scientists," he says, pointing out that a public appeal he wrote to present his candidacy has been endorsed by 438 researchers and professors from all over the world, 47 of them Nobel laureates.

In the letter, Mr. Coscioni wrote: "10 million Italians could be treated with therapies based on stem cells — people suffering from a range of diseases, including Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, spinal muscular atrophy, traumatic damage to the spinal marrow, muscular dystrophy, tumors and leukemia, diabetes, heart attacks and strokes."

Stem cells are unspecialized cells that are able to produce other tissue cells. As a result, scientists believe they can use them to regenerate damaged body parts. Earlier this month, the New York Times reported that two teams of researchers were able to use bone marrow stem cells to repair the hearts of rodents who had been afflicted by heart attack and collateral damage.

However, it is still unclear whether adult or embryonic stem cells will prove more useful in regenerating tissues, so scientists want to test both.

While this sort of research is legally regulated in countries like Britain and the U.S., it is forbidden in Italy. In September 2000, the European Parliament rejected a resolu-

tion backing therapeutic cloning. That was when Mr. Coscioni says he decided to take personal action alongside the Radicals, whose seven euro-parliamentarians voted in favor of the resolution.

In the 1970s the Radicals, led by Marco Pannella and Ms. Bonino, fought — and won — political battles in favor of divorce and abortion. In later years, they focused on anti-prohibitionism for light drugs, scoring some minor victory but so far losing the overall war. To this day, they stand more or less alone in a country where most parties are wary of irritating the church.

"Luca Coscioni and his infirmity are a banner in favor of a secular battle for biotechnological research against the limits imposed by the Catholic Church," wrote Stefano Folli, a political analyst with Corriere della Sera, in a recent editorial. "It is a proud gesture because once again [the Radicals] tend to justify their political solitude with a supposed moral superiority. ... One can't rule out that, once again, they might be right."

Travel

Alitalia flight attendants plan a 24-hour strike on Friday, April 27, starting at 11:30 A.M.

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Claudio Gatti Editor-in-Chief
Christopher Emsden Managing Editor
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Luisa Milanese Office Manager
Joan Pra Levis Graphic Designer

ITALY DAILY, Via Rizzoli, 2
20132 Milano - Italy
Tel. 02-25.84.3391 - Fax 02-25.84.3775
E-mail: italydaily@rcs.it

RCS-IHT Srl
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Gianni D'Angelo Managing Director

ADVERTISING
RCS EDITORI S.P.A. - SETTORE PUBBLICITÀ
Via Mecenate, 91 - 20138 Milano
Tel. 02-50.95.65.45 - Fax 02-50.95.62.64

STAMPA
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