

Rome, 21 August 2019

Yesterday proved to be something of a watershed in Italy. There were a couple of reasons for that. In Rome, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte addressed both houses of Parliament. In a speech which pulled no punches, he was trenchant in his criticism of his Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, whom he described as putting personal and party interests before those of the country and whose fitness to hold any kind of office he called into question.



Conte, whose response this was to the motion of no confidence lodged by his erstwhile Deputy Prime Minister, then tendered his resignation to President Sergio Mattarella. Whilst the president mulls over next steps, Conte will remain in office. Behind closed doors, the political manoeuvring continues. The coalition between right-wing Lega and anti-Establishment 5 Star now shattered, Salvini hopes to capitalise on the chaos and propel himself into the premier's seat. Whether other parties will form an uneasy alliance to stop that from happening remains to be seen. Meantime, the business of actually governing Italy is once again on hold.

A few hours later, at Italy's southernmost outpost, 83 migrants disembarked from the *Open Arms* at the jetty at Lampedusa. The crew had been seeking a safe port for 19 days. Offers to host those aboard came from the French government and Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI). Yet no EU country would allow the boat to dock. When an Italian regional judge revoked the order forbidding disembarkation, Salvini immediately lodged an appeal (now understood to be without legal foundation), effectively stalling the order's implementation. National and international celebrities boarded the ship as it was re-supplied in an effort to draw global attention to the unfolding crisis. Still EU governments stood firm. Medics and psychologists aboard reported serious concerns, and conditions rapidly deteriorated. Those most at risk and, eventually, all unaccompanied minors were evacuated. Some of those left aboard leapt into the sea, attempting to swim to dry land. Still EU governments stood firm. Spain, five days away, finally offered a safe

port. Only after the *Open Arms* crew refused that offer in light of the conditions aboard, and only after the coalition's collapse, did Italy relent and were the exhausted passengers welcomed by a small crowd at the Lampedusa jetty.



The suggestion is repeatedly made by the Far Right here that those who arrive here by boat are, somehow, all “clandestine”. The contrast is often made with those who arrive by plane, either through UNHCR evacuations from Libya or the FCEI’s humanitarian corridors programme. Whilst it is the case that beneficiaries of those schemes already have a humanitarian visa, it is simply incorrect to say that those who arrive by boat are all “clandestine”. An asylum seeker may arrive by boat, plane or, indeed, any other means. Whether or not their eventual claim for international protection is genuine depends on whether they meet the criteria set out in the 1951 Geneva Convention which converge around “a well-founded fear of persecution” or the criteria set out by the EU which converge around “a real risk of suffering serious harm”. The criteria under both sets of norms have nothing to do with the means of transport used by the person seeking to reach Europe.

There can be no doubt that the migrants who spent 19 days aboard the *Open Arms* will have been traumatised by that experience. However, there can be little doubt that what they will have experienced prior to being rescued will have been significantly worse. According to various sources, for most who make the journey across the Mediterranean, this is the end of an arduous journey made up of several stages during which violence, exploitation and abuse will all have been encountered. Each individual on the *Open Arms* will potentially carry the physical and mental scars of those experiences and it will be for each of them to convince a Commission examining a claim for asylum or subsidiary protection that they cannot return. Many will fail to do so. However, it is a basic human right for them to be permitted to make that claim and to have it properly examined, *however they got here*.

The current Minister of the Interior does not answer that point in the rhetoric regarding migration. Instead, he casts judges whose decisions contradict his policies as “political” and considers closure of the ports to be necessary in a society which puts national interests first. The EU collectively turns its back on calls for a safe port and, in doing so, colludes with that approach. At what stage, I wonder, did universal human rights become hostage to national sovereignty? And at what point do citizens cease to hold their leaders to account on such a fundamental point? At a time when Italy may about to usher in a new Prime Minister whose views on these matters could not be clearer, these are questions which cannot be ignored.