



Opinion

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Bravo Renato Brunetta, Man of the Year for Italy

Dennis Redmont

ROME - It is that time again: person of the year, the most powerful, the greatest and so on...

So what is happening in Italy, the country that has the secret of "dolce vita," that sense of style and sensuality which is envied worldwide for taking life easy?



Well actually, a diminutive dynamo is jolting the country's 3.6 million public servants back to their offices and instilling some accountability into one of Europe's slovenly bureaucracies.

His name is Renato Brunetta, and for the first time he is starting to make a dent into the civil service which has had a legendary legion of slackers or "fanulloni."

A few examples:

There was a "sick" sanitation worker who was caught singing in a disco after putting up promotional posters around town.

There was the judge who had taken nine months off because of a bad back who was discovered training for a transatlantic boat race.

There was the public employee in a small town on the northwestern coast who punched his time card and then went wild boar hunting. But bad luck, according to newspaper La Stampa, he got shot in his leg and was found out.

There was the postal employee on disability leave who spent part of her recovery, vacationing in Kenya saying the sun would heal her sore back. There was the mayor of Banzi in southern Italy who did not come to work for 166 days, more than five months, over an 18 month period.

Italian public employees were taking advantage of an average of 20 days off in 2006 for health and other reasons, according to government figures. That's on top of the 30 days vacation for most public employees.

Nevertheless, when this column asked "Doesn't anybody around here want to work anymore?" in March 2007, the writer, who also lives in Italy, was admonished by Italians for biting the hand that fed him.

Enter Brunetta, minister of Public Administration and Innovation, who wears five Mont Blanc pens in his shirt pocket, delivers quips faster than many stand up comedians. Aspiring to a Nobel Prize for economics in his youth, he now says he will receive a Nobel Prize for medicine for instantly curing 60,000 civil servant who have come off "sick leave" after wages were docked for unjustified absenteeism.

To reduce absenteeism, his ministry is cutting bonuses for those who take sick leave, requiring rigorous doctor's notes and rewarding public workers who do a good job and walk through the electronic turnstiles which are being installed in the ministries.

The campaign has shown such success, that absenteeism is down by 45 percent in August, September and October 2008, compared to 2007.

Brunetta has not had an easy time. He has earned the insult of "pocket monster" by former foreign minister, Massimo D'Alema, and another center-left figure called him "mini-minister" due to the 58-year-old professor's small size. But both apologized later.

And he easily became the most popular minister of the Berlusconi government for his battle against the deeply entrenched, sclerotic bureaucracy which has dropped Italy to 42nd place out of 82 industrial countries in the competitive standards of the Economist magazine. In Europe, Italy is 16th out of 18, with countries Turkey and Greece just behind.


"People call me the 'Rock Star' minister. They call out 'Santo Subito (Saint Immediately)," Brunetta said recently, referring to the shouts of mourners who wanted the Late Pope John Paul II to be made a saint immediately after his death in 2005. "They understand my message. For them I am like Zorro," he said.

Brunetta does not want to cut the size of the civil service. He merely wants to make it more efficient. So he will shame many bureaucrats into working harder. In 2009, every public booth will have an electronic board with three emoticons --smiling, frowning and neutral Ñ which clients will press after their request is handled. In addition, Brunetta is enlisting state-monopoly tobacco shops, post offices and state lotto booths to collect such taxes as the yearly car assessment, television and other dues, which are handled by the state, to ease collections and bring the administration close to the people. It is any Italian's nightmare to queue up and wait for his turn to pay taxes.

Brunetta has also been attacked for his propensity to buy properties in Venice, Rome, Ravello and Umbria for personal vacations and as residences. But Brunetta, a socialist who joined the Berlusconi government after his party dissolved, says it is one of his only hobbies. After all, he has been under police escort for over 15 years because he is under threat of the Red Brigades after he advocated tough measures against the Communist labor unions, some of which harbored underground terrorism.

"My clients are 60 million Italians who are dissatisfied and if I do not succeed by the spring of 2009 and the brain scan of the bureaucracy is dead, then I will resign," he says. Otherwise, Brunetta has big plans: he will export this e-government model for development to 15 countries. Guess which is one of his candidates: Turkey.

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