

Italian television, magazines and newspapers such as the influential *Il Giornale*, and the country's biggest publishing house, Mondadori. Throw in the current European football champions, AC Milan, and a host of food, construction, insurance and other business ventures, and you have Italy's richest man estimated to be worth a cool \$13 billion.

You might be thinking there is nothing strange in a successful businessman doing well in politics. True, but consider the political career of Berlusconi in more detail. The Italians have a belief: no one can do well in business without being corrupt and having political patronage. What is true for the average Italian businessman is a thousand-fold more true for the 'started-from-nothing' billionaire Berlusconi.

Berlusconi's leading political patron was former socialist prime minister, Bettino Craxi. In 1993 Milan judges launched 'Operation Clean Hands' to purge Italian politics and judiciary of corruption. They described Craxi as the epitome of the corruption they were trying to root out. Craxi managed to escape to exile in Tunisia: Berlusconi lost his patron. Rather than seek a new one he decided, with the drive and determination that had characterized his business career, to become his own patron. The Forza Italia (Go Italy) Party was duly launched in January 1994. Up to that point, Mr Berlusconi had exhibited absolutely no interest in entering politics.

Just two months later, in March 1994, Forza Italia became the leading partner in Italy's new coalition government and Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister. His victory owed much to his advertising company Publitalia (50 of Forza Italia's elected representatives were Publitalia executives) and to his control of Italy's TV and media. That first stint in government lasted just seven months — brought to an end by differences with his coalition partners and his own indictment for tax fraud. But in 2001 he was voted back into office.

In the two and a half years that he has been prime minister, Berlusconi has shown a disturb-

earliest pieces of Berlusconi legislation, for example, was the abolition of inheritance tax — very useful when you have so much to pass on. Another law passed in December further relaxed limits on media ownership.

does is allowed to slip: in Italy, nothing is questioned.

The Berlusconi section of the media (i.e. most of it) spouts only praise for the prime minister. Others who try to criticize him are silenced. Enzo Biaigi, one of Italy's most respected TV journalists, was hounded out of RAI TV (not owned by Berlusconi) after pressure from the PM. His crime? — laughing when an interviewee made a joke about Berlusconi. In October, the European Union ordered an inquiry into freedom of expression in Italy — things are that bad.

The courts have attempted to check the worst Berlusconi business practices: he has faced charges including tax fraud, improper accounting, bribing judges, bribing financial police, and illegal financing of political parties.

So far he has managed to evade conviction. Invoking the statute of limitations is one Berlusconi evasion strategy: another is changing the law. Bang in the middle of a corruption trial last year, the government passed a law granting the prime minister and four other holders of top public positions full immunity from prosecution so long as they remained in office. The Constitutional Court has just thrown the law out as a breach of equality laws — but going by his record, the prime minister can soon be expected to come out with some other self-protective legislation.

In contrast to his domestic record, Berlusconi's performance on the international stage has been more comical than corrupt. He modestly describes himself as 'the best political leader in Europe and in the world', and claims 'there is no one on the world stage who can compete with me'. The EU clearly does not share that vision: it heaved a collective sigh of relief

the occupation of Iraq. Unlike Tony Blair, the Italian leader frankly admits the reason is American power. But his views on Islam suggest that his support is motivated by more than pragmatism: "We must be aware of the superiority of our civilization....The West will continue to conquer peoples, even if it means a confrontation with another civilization, Islam, firmly entrenched where it was 1,400 years ago."

Such comments, as well as a tendency towards vulgarity, have made many a diplomat cringe. At the EU summit in December, he declared 'Let's talk about football and women', and then turned to the four-time married German Chancellor: "Gerhard, why don't you start?" George Bush might beat Berlusconi in the ignorance stakes, but no one can match the Italian leader's buffoonery. What other leader would disappear for weeks from public view — as Berlusconi did for most of December — in order to have a face-lift? What other leader would become known for his 'pancake' make-up?

It has to be stressed here that all this is happening not in some banana republic in the middle of Africa, but in a modern, developed country. Italy is one of the leading players in Europe: a founder member of the European Union. It has the sixth largest economy in the world; it is a member of the G-8. Italy is a country where you have every right to expect the highest norms of democratic government to be observed. That they are not is bad for democracy, bad for Europe, but most of all, bad for Italy.

The recent collapse of Parmalat — amidst a welter of accounting scandals — shows what happens when the state fails to perform its regulatory role. Parmalat is the tip of the iceberg. There is a deep malaise in the Italian state: a malaise that is both personified and exacerbated by Silvio Berlusconi. Italians have twice chosen him to be their prime minister. If they want a government that is clean, democratic and serves the public interest (rather than its own private interest), they should not make the same choice a third time.