

In his powerful new book, *Freedom for Sale*, John Kampfner devotes a chapter to Italy. It starts with an account of a joint press conference with Vladimir Putin and Silvio Berlusconi, at which Putin is asked pointed questions about his private life by a Russian journalist. When the Russian leader reacts angrily to the implications of what have been said, Berlusconi responds 'by pretending, mockingly, to mow down the offending reporter with a machine gun.' His spokesman said later that 'It was just a gesture, a playful gesture; in fact it was appreciated'. It is well known the risks that journalists run in Russia, and the degree to which Berlusconi controls the Italian media has been notorious for years, with critical editors having been forced from their posts, successful satirical television shows taken off air and the affairs of the country often seeming to have been subjugated to the prime minister's media and other business interests. The time may finally have come when the Vatican can no longer avoid the Berlusconi question, and if this is indeed the case the battle that may be about to commence will cast the Church in the unlikely role of defender of a free press.

This is not to say that conflict is inevitable. Over the years the Vatican has not allowed itself to be provoked into action by the Italian government's increasingly hostile treatment of immigrants or asylum seekers or travelling people. Until this August, not even the increasingly lurid stories, apparently well-substantiated, that have been emerging about the Prime Minister's flagrant personal immorality has seemed to matter. This latter silence ended with the decision by the editor of the Italian daily newspaper owned by the bishops *Avvenire* to draw attention to 'the unease, the mortification, the suffering that this arrogant neglect of sobriety has caused the Catholic Church.' As a direct result of this intervention, the editor of *Avvenire* Dino Boffo (in post for fifteen years) found himself the subject of a series of vitriolic attacks about his own sexuality and behaviour in *Il Giornale*, a right wing newspaper owned by Berlusconi's brother. Eventually Boffo had enough. Declaring that he could not 'accept that day after day there should be a war of words wrecking my family and increasingly stunning Italians', he resigned from his post. Berlusconi had his scalp and the Vatican had received its warning.

The Church surely needs to respond to this by more than a cancelled lunch here or an oblique Papal remonstrance there. The issue has become one of power. Berlusconi's *modus operandi*, one that has served him extremely well, has been to destroy all critical comment by the force of his personal control of the media and his political hegemony over the apparatus of government, each backed where necessary by the deployment of his huge financial wealth. He has gone a long way towards destroying the judiciary and now he seeks to tame the Church. If nothing of substance is said or done, if the Church at very senior levels allows Boffo to go without a fight, then the kind of criticism also made by Kampfner in his book, essentially that the Church is indifferent to the morality of political leaders as long as they deliver on the very narrow range of ethical issues about which church leaders are concerned to the exclusion of all else, will continue to gather ground. If Berlusconi is not shown to have overreached himself, one of the last potential bulwarks against his power in Italy, the Roman Catholic Church, will very publicly be seen to have fallen away. Which Cardinal, even Pontiff, will risk the wrath of Berlusconi's attack dogs for whom truth is secondary to the dictates of power and the demands of their master's wrathful vengeance.

There are lessons in this sorry tale that go beyond Italy. The subtitle of Kampfner's book is *How we made money and lost our liberty* and the story he tells is of how democracy around the world has come to be redefined in the post Cold War era of big business and capitalist confidence as a mechanistic route to power rather than a means for good governance via separation of powers, accountability and respect for the rights of all. His book starts with Singapore where elections are held of course but where the ruling party (in power since self-government was obtained in 1959) continues to hold the vast majority of the seats and where strong dissent remains a dangerous route for any aspiring politician or activist to take. The chapter on 'Russia: Angry Capitalist' explains why Berlusconi's machine-gunning sense of humour at the Putin press conference was so inappropriate, yet Russia too is ostensibly a democracy, a member of the Council of Europe, with a judge on the European Court of Human Rights and all the other trappings of legitimacy. The Chinese alone seem yet to have worked out how to have an authoritarian power structure *within* rather than *in opposition* to democracy. Presumably, and depressingly, the Communist party leadership can now see that the Tiananmen Square brand of democracy – freedom; liberty; dissent; respect for human rights – is not the only version on offer.

The traditional democracies – those with strong democratic practices embedded in their cultures – face a difficult challenge in defining their response to the growth of these new pseudo-democracies. It is a disturbing fact that this emerging class of authoritarian democrats are often popular, not least because the control they have over their peoples ensures that little criticism is allowed to reach into the mainstream of public life. During the Cold War, Italy's importance to democracy lay in the temptation the country always faced to choose to go down the Communist route. It could be argued that the exigencies of the Cold War meant that Italy was always considered too dangerous a place to risk growing a true democratic tradition: better the Christian Democrat you know than the Communist you might otherwise have. If so, Italians are playing a price today for this failure of nurturing. They need to see that democracy is about more than populism and that elections are empty without an independent judiciary and a free press. The Vatican should seize on the opportunity offered by the nasty and cruel humiliation of Dino Boffo to make clear that Berlusconi's version of democracy is not one it recognises.