



east of Milan. With the profits he set up an advertising agency and spent the 1970s building up a network of small television channels.

In 1978 he founded Fininvest, the media group that would one day form the basis of a vast media empire. Fininvest quickly expanded into the country's first privately owned and national network of TV stations. In just five years he is said to have earned almost €60 million.

An Italian law at the time restricted nationwide broadcasting to government-controlled channels. But so influential had Berlusconi become that when three Italian regions banned broadcasts from his channels on legal grounds, all were back on the air within four days. Such an outcome owed much to Berlusconi's wily political ways; he had previously befriended the then prime minister, Socialist Bettino Craxi, who duly passed an emergency decree legalising Berlusconi's broadcasts.

Having taken on the powerful world of entrenched media interests, he turned his attention to politics.

For decades, Italian politics had been characterised by an unusual form of stable instability. Although more than 50 governments ruled Italy in its first 50 postwar years, the essential rules of the game remained largely the same. The conservative Christian Democrats dominated governments without ever winning an overall majority. The Italian Communist Party regularly polled about one-third of the vote. The remaining votes were

of interest only to see who would make up the numbers in a grand coalition formed to keep the Communists from power.

The system was, however, rotten to the core. In the early 1990s, all of the established political parties except the Communists were discredited by a series of corruption scandals and accusations of Mafia ties. By 1994, a Communist election victory had begun to appear inevitable.

Amid an unprecedented political vacuum, Berlusconi strode onto the political stage, eager to portray himself as the country's saviour, both from the old guard of politics and the menace of a Communist takeover. His Forza Italia party, he claimed, would be the bulwark against Italy becoming a Soviet-style state.

More than 8 million Italians (or one-fifth of voters) made Forza Italia the country's largest political party, a stunning victory that would forever reshape Italian politics. In 1994, Berlusconi became Italy's 50th post-war prime minister. He was Italy's "novus homo", the outsider who would guide it to a brave new era.

If Berlusconi's greatest achievement was to overthrow the old guard, his greatest political failure was to replace it with the politics of personal enrichment. When once asked about the potential conflicts of interest that he as prime minister and media baron was forced to negotiate, his reply was simple: "If I, taking care of everyone's interests, also take care of my own, you

can't talk about a conflict of interest." And if his genius was his ability to talk the language of the Italian street, his crime was to take politics down to the level of the gutter.

But there is little doubt Berlusconi has always displayed an uncanny affinity with Italian voters.

"What do most Italians think about Silvio Berlusconi? He's just like us. And the ones who don't are afraid he might be," writes Beppe Severgnini, a columnist for the leading Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* in his recent book *Mamma Mia!*

Berlusconi, he writes, "adores his kids, talks about his mamma, knows his soccer, makes money, loves new homes, hates rules, tells jokes, uses bad language, adores women, parties hard, and is convivial to a fault.

"He has a good memory and a knack for tactical amnesia. He's come a long way, switching between life's freeways and its shortcuts.

"He's unconventional but knows the importance of convention. He extols the church in the morning and the family in the afternoon, and brings girlfriends home in the evening."

Berlusconi's skill at appearing to be all things to all people, according to Severgnini, is unrivalled on the European stage. "All politicians need to be able to identify with their interlocutors. Few are capable of actually turning into them. If he went to see a basketball game, he'd walk out taller."

And, in what Severgnini calls the "Medici factor", the "attitudes of many Italians towards Mr Berlusconi are reminiscent of how their forebears regarded the signore, or lord. We know he puts his own glory, family and interests ahead of everything else but we hope he'll spare a thought for us."

The secret to Berlusconi's success also derives from his cultivation of voters least likely to be influenced by negative media coverage, and hence less likely to change their votes.

"They're people who don't read the papers and watch a lot of television," says Nando Pagnoncelli, president of the Italian polling firm Ipsos.

And on that television, these voters hear an unashamedly pro-Berlusconi line, one that speaks, as Italians like to say, *alla pancia* (to the stomach) of ordinary people. Professor Maurizio Cotta of the University of Siena says: "He knows their weak spots, their fear of discipline, of the state, of losing their homes, of being caught with their hands in the till."

It is within this context of Berlusconi speaking to his constituency regardless of the wider reaction that comments such as the following from 2006 can be understood: "We must fight against tax evasion but also defend the rights of tax evaders, or companies that make mistakes."

Such an approach even has the grudging admiration of one of the scions of Italy's intellectual left, the novelist and essayist Umberto Eco.

"Berlusconi is a genius in communication," Eco told *The Guardian* newspaper. "From the beginning he identified his target – middle-aged people who watch television. Young people do not watch television; they are on the internet. The people who support Berlusconi are 50 and 60-year-old ladies and retired people who, in a country with an ageing population, make a powerful electoral force.

"So even some of his famous blunders may be blunders for me and you but probably for the provincial 60-year-old lady or gentlemen, they are not. His appeal was 'pay less taxes'. When the premier says you are right

not to pay taxes, you are pleased." That Berlusconi has kept himself at the forefront of Italian public life for more than a decade owes much to these finely honed instincts of political survival. Whether he can stay there will soon depend on judges in a Milan court, judges whom he has in the past described as "mentally disturbed" and "anthropologically different from the rest of the human race". The prosecutor in the bunga-bunga trial has called for a six-year prison sentence and for Berlusconi to be banned from political office for life. A decision is expected within weeks.

Even so, few Italians expect him to go to prison; although convicted of false testimony and fraud in the past, he has made abundant use of an appeals system that means he is yet to serve any time in jail. Berlusconi will almost certainly appeal any guilty verdict in the current trial, thereby prolonging the process for years.

If, however, voters are to be the judges, the question over Berlusconi's political future was largely decided in the March elections: in spite of everything, his centre-right *Il Popolo della Libertà* (People of Freedom) coalition won almost 10 million votes, or 29.1 per cent. He may be politically unpalatable as prime minister for now, but the election confirmed him as the kingmaker in Italy's government. It was a stunning result that *Il Giornale* newspaper described as "il miracolo Berlusconi" (the Berlusconi miracle) and it served

Silvio Berlusconi is unconventional but knows the importance of convention. He extols the church in the morning and the family in the afternoon, and brings girlfriends home in the evening.

as a reminder that the scandals matter little to his loyal supporters.

With such a sideshow dominating media coverage, it appears almost incidental that Italy's economy faces its worst crisis in a generation, corruption scandals plague all corners of the Italian polity, and disillusionment among Italian voters is at an all-time high. Instead of tackling the bigger issues, the media has, for the most part, preferred to be titillated by the rampant libido of Italy's crooning Casanova.

It all dates back to a time in the 1990s when Italian politics stood at a crossroads; when, according to Severgnini, "many Italians would have voted for the Devil. And Mr Berlusconi can be pretty diabolical. But Satan's style is something else."

This diabolical style has served Berlusconi well in the past and, with all eyes on the law courts, he has staked his political future on winning in a different court, that of public opinion. And for now he seems to be winning.

Anthony Ham is a Melbourne-based writer.
NATAGE A017