

# 'Civil war' in Italy after Berlusconi newspaper attacks ally

Claim that Gianfranco Fini is being used by Left could backfire, **Richard Owen** reports from Rome

Civil war has broken out in the ranks of the Italian Government after Silvio Berlusconi's mouthpiece newspaper attacked his main political ally, calling him ridiculous and a tool of the Left.

The battleground was once again the front page of *Il Giornale*, the Berlusconi family newspaper. Its new editor ran a diatribe against Gianfranco Fini, the Speaker of the lower house of parliament. Mr Fini's supporters were enraged, while opposition politicians and commentators predicted the beginning of the end of the Prime Minister's reign.

In the article, "Comrade Fini" was accused of failing to support the Prime Minister over the continuing sex scandal allegations, and instead siding with the Left on issues from immigration and gay rights to euthanasia. "You are being used by the Left," thundered Vittorio Feltri, addressing Mr Fini directly. "Turn back to the Right, otherwise you risk becoming even more ridiculous than you have often appeared in recent times."

Mr Fini, 57, is the former leader of Alleanza Nazionale, the "post-Fascist" party that merged with Mr Berlusconi's Forza Italia to form the ruling People of Liberty (PdL) party. He is viewed as a potential successor to the Prime Minister, who turns 73 at the end of the month.

Mr Berlusconi tried to smooth things over, declaring that "everything is fine with Fini — there are no tensions". He claimed he had been unaware of the attack and disassociated himself from it.

This was not Mr Fini's interpreta-

tion. "Everything is not fine," he retorted, adding that there were "political problems Berlusconi cannot hide". Mr Fini's aides said he would make clear his position at a PdL seminar in Gubbio tomorrow.

The article followed a similar broadside against Dino Boffo, editor of the Catholic daily *Avvenire*, claiming that he was a homosexual with a police record. The latter campaign, which Mr Fini criticised as mob violence, backfired, damaging Mr Berlusconi's already shaky relationship with the Vatican, although it did lead to Mr Boffo's resignation this week.

Italo Bocchino, deputy head of the PdL faction in parliament and a Fini ally, said the decision to follow this with a "violent" attack on the co-leader of the ruling party was incomprehensible.

Despite his association with Italy's far Right, Mr Fini has struck a more measured and statesmanlike pose since entering the Government, repeatedly apologising to Israel and the Jewish community for Fascist-era anti-Semitism and disassociating himself from the Mussolini legacy. He has largely stayed aloof from Mr Berlusconi's battles with the press, the Left and the Church. His supporters were incensed this week when Umberto Bossi, leader of the anti-immigrant Northern League, a coalition partner, called Mr Fini mad for advocating voting rights for immigrants.

Mr Fini said he would not be intimidated by Mr Feltri's attack. Mr Feltri appears to have been brought in to spearhead a media counter-attack

against Mr Berlusconi's critics. The stream of stories about showgirls and prostitutes have riled the Prime Minister, although he claims his approval ratings are over 70 per cent.

Opening a trade fair in Milan yesterday, Mr Berlusconi appealed for "team spirit" to help him to tackle Italy's economic problems as the global recession lifted. He repeated his claim that the judiciary was conspiring against him, and said his legal actions against "Catholic-Communist newspapers for defamation and calumnies" did not make him a dictator.

"Dictators first impose censorship and then close the papers down," he said. "Do you know why Italians have faith in me? Not just because I am young and handsome but because I am an entrepreneur and so have no need to steal." His critics were attacking him "like wild bulls", but he was a bullfighter who was afraid of no one, he added. Last weekend he denied having health problems, saying: "Superman would envy me."

Pierferdinando Casini, leader of the



Christian Democrats, said the Prime Minister was "in a delirium of one against all". He added: "The post-Berlusconi era has begun."

The *Corriere della Sera* declared: "The downward curve of Berlusconi has begun, though it is unclear how long it will take and where it will end."