

Cut-throat savings (16 ottobre 2008)

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Abstract

In an attempt to boost its struggling economy, Italy's government is focusing on easy, but unwise, targets.

It is a dark and angry time for scientists in Italy, faced as they are with a government acting out its own peculiar cost-cutting philosophy. Last week, tens of thousands of researchers took to the streets to register their opposition to a proposed bill designed to control civil-service spending. If passed, as expected, the bill would dispose of nearly 2,000 temporary research staff, who are the backbone of the country's grossly understaffed research institutions — and about half of whom had already been selected for permanent jobs.

Even as the scientists were marching, Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right government, which took office in May, decreed that the budgets of both universities and research could be used as funds to shore up Italy's banks and credit institutes. This is not the first time that Berlusconi has targeted universities. In August, he signed a decree that cut university budgets by 10% and allowed only one in five of any vacant academic positions to be filled. It also allowed universities to convert into private foundations to bring in additional income. Given the current climate, university rectors believe that the latter step will be used to justify further budget cuts, and that it will eventually compel them to drop courses that have little commercial value, such as the classics, or even basic sciences. As that bombshell hit at the beginning of the summer holidays, the implications have only just been fully recognized — too late, as the decree is now being transformed into law.

Meanwhile, the government's minister for education, universities and research, Mariastella Gelmini, has remained silent on all issues related to her ministry except secondary schools, and has allowed major and destructive governmental decisions to be carried through without raising objection. She has refused to meet with scientists and academics to hear their concerns, or explain to them the policies that seem to require their sacrifice. And she has failed to delegate an undersecretary to handle these issues in her place.

Scientific organizations affected by the civil-service bill have instead been received by the bill's designer, Renato Brunetta, minister of public administration and innovation. Brunetta maintains that little can be done to stop or change the bill — even though it is still being discussed in committees, and has yet to be voted on by both chambers. In a newspaper interview, Brunetta also likened researchers to *capitani di ventura*, or Renaissance mercenary adventurers, saying that to give them permanent jobs would be "a little like killing them". This misrepresents an issue that researchers have explained to him — that any country's scientific base requires a healthy ratio of permanent to temporary staff, with the latter (such as postdocs) circulating between solid, well equipped, permanent research labs. In Italy, scientists tried to tell Brunetta, this ratio has become very unhealthy.

The Berlusconi government may feel that draconian budget measures are necessary, but its attacks on Italy's research base are unwise and short-sighted. The government has treated research as just another expense to be cut, when in fact it is better seen as an investment in building a twenty-first-century knowledge economy. Indeed, Italy has already embraced this concept by signing up to the European Union's 2000 Lisbon agenda, in which member states pledged to raise their research and development (R&D) budgets to 3% of their gross domestic product. Italy, a G8 country, has one of

the lowest R&D expenditures in that group — at barely 1.1%, less than half that of comparable countries such as France and Germany.

The government needs to consider more than short-term gains brought about through a system of decrees made easy by compliant ministers. If it wants to prepare a realistic future for Italy, as it should, it should not idly reference the distant past, but understand how research works in Europe in the present.