

THE SUPERSTAR MAYOR

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Telos: Every time someone talks about the direct election of the Prime Minister, people use the very evocative expression "Mayor of Italy".

So, is it true that a Mayor has, in the administration of his or her own city, more power than the Prime Minister has today?

Isabella Conti: The most relevant (and most exciting) part of administering a municipality is that the policies, actions and projects implemented for the community have an immediate impact on citizens' lives. Being able to concretely improve quality of life in your own community is something that is extremely motivating. There are sectors where Mayors do not have the power to take action because they remain the competence of higher-level bodies. However, there is no question that in matters that fall under the competence of the municipality, the results of their policies are more visible than the results a Prime Minister is able to achieve. However, there is one other thing: the size of the community of reference. Obviously, acting within an area with a generally homogenous history and social fabric is easier; whereas nation-wide actions involve a very heterogeneous and broader public.

The breakdown in the party system has likely been the source of people's widespread anti-political sentiment. And yet this gap between citizens and politics is not nearly as wide when it comes to the Mayor. Are your citizens still passionate about politics?

I was elected with almost 81% of the preference votes and my civic list alone got over 56% of the preference votes. Running with a civic list also allowed me to give many citizens the opportunity to feel welcome and listened to who otherwise might have had greater difficulty identifying with a party, either because of their disappointment with this or that leader or because they did not actually feel fully represented. Many have had the courage to become part of this civic project convinced of being far from politics. However, what I have found is that citizens are far more passionate about politics than those who call themselves "politicians". The reason is simple: politics is debating the issues, interpreting reality for what it is (and not for what we want it to be) and examining concrete proposals to solve problems. Too often inside the parties, discussions are not focussed on the heart of the problems and the issues; they are consumed by internal diatribes, by creating or joining currents connected to the personal careers of this or that official. But this is not politics; these are (poor and short-sighted) tactics. Clearly, if citizens come to a party expecting to find a space for analysis and study and then finds themselves caught in the crossfire between factions or in a war where brothers struggle against one another to wield power, people get disenchanted, they pull away, they feel nauseated. It is the mayor's job to show citizens a vision of the future, of the world, of the value hierarchy. This wonderful synergy should not be the prerogative of local administrations, Politics as a vocation with a capital "P" needs to be rediscovered at the national level as well: provide answers and take care of people.

You are a Mayor on your second term, re-elected with 81% of the votes. You have got a lot of stories to tell: some good, some not so good. From the Colata di Idice case to free day-care in San Lazzaro, which went from being an election promise to reality. Could you tell us about these years of "struggle and battle"?

These have been tough but exciting years. My first term started off uphill because of a very difficult choice I had to make, which I decided to move forward on with determination, in spite of it all, responding personally, always. I felt really alone during that time, but the results, starting with the freezing of the Idice building project, but not only that, have been surprising: we stopped land consumption, requalified the city; houses are worth 13% more than they did 5 years ago; from 2015 to 2019 we lowered taxes by 20% overall and we lowered the waste tax by 18%; we have actually closed the slot machine halls and we were the first in Italy to do so; we created the first free day-care centre and starting this year they are all free; we removed 70,000 m² of asbestos, recovered 3 million euros in unpaid taxes and, to top it all off, we have saved the municipality 3 million euros in 5 years; we won tenders and collected contributions at the regional, national and European level thanks to innovative, very high-level projects.

But the greatest satisfaction came from how my city has embraced me: that 81% of the preference votes gave me new-found and greater determination. It confirmed that the choices made for the good of the citizens were the right ones and that the vision of San Lazzaro that I tried to show to my people was not only shared but experienced by many.

The most striking thing about your story as Mayor is that politics is ever present in how you administrate, in how you try to change things, in how you take part in the public good. Many Mayors tend to stay well away from politics, or at least they downplay its value. Could one say that it is politics, in the Aristotelian sense of the word, that moves you?

I am moved by the desire to change the world, for the better. I am moved by the desire to be useful to people, to use my life in a positive way, to work for social justice, to spread high values expressed in people's daily lives. I am moved by a sense of

mission, service and beauty. And above all, I am moved by the desire for Good, which I would certainly say Aristotle's Politics has something to do with!

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

After Naples, PRIMOPIANOSCALA, is heading to San Lazzaro di Savena. Where? Yes, to a small, yet not so insignificant municipality that is also part of the Metropolitan City of Bologna. So why, after going to so many large cities, have we decided to interview Mayor Isabella Conti? Because to paraphrase an advertisement from the past: it doesn't take a big city to make a big mayor.

What it takes is great dedication and great administrative skill. And Isabella Conti has proven she has both.

Alongside our interview, she told us *'I have always fought for the common good, I have always put the public interest before anything else, out of a deep sense of social justice and a very strong spirit of service towards my community and my Country.'* She talks to us about her passions and hobbies, which you can read about in her profile, but she also confessed that, *'In the last 5 years I have dedicated myself fully to the mission of being mayor with enthusiasm and dedication, a mission that is all-consuming but that has been a true life accelerator. After my first term I was definitely different, more aware, more competent, better prepared, more motivated. All of this has compensated for the fatigue, the lawsuits, the sleepless nights, the huge responsibility.'*

And how did her fellow citizens very concretely compensate her for her efforts?

They elected her for a second term by an overwhelming majority: 81% of the votes. You could almost diagnose a case of 'falling in love'. Not for nothing, though, Conti said during her electoral campaign. *'Love for my land and my people is what continues to fuel my dreams, my plans, my choice to pursue this adventure, even today.'* Of the many acts that have distinguished her administration, and that Mayor Conti describes in her interview, one that stands out: to provide free day-care starting from September 2019.

Conti is a woman of politics who is also very courageous. The story of the Colata di Idice speaks for itself: when she decided to freeze a massive building project that would have built 582 new apartments in San Lazzaro on a green area.

At the time, on the political front, Conti received telephone calls of solidarity from the then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the President of the Emilia-Romagna Region Stefano Bonaccini and the Democratic Party, where however many of her fellow party members did not appreciate her strong stances. And Isabella Conti referred back to Renzi's phone call in 2015 when he told her *'Don't give up,'* in the speech she gave when joining Renzi's new party *Italia Viva* (Alive Italy) during the 2019 Leopolda convention in Florence on 20 October.

She won everybody over with that speech and the newspapers defined her as 'the rising star of the Leopolda convention'. For us, she is the Superstar Mayor.

For the cover of the interview with the Mayor of San Lazzaro di Savena we immediately chose a bicycle. Not only because in Emilia bicycles are a *historic* means of transport, but because the municipality of San Lazzaro was a founder, along with another 7 cities throughout Europe, of the European Cycling Challenge. The initiative, launched in 2012, aims to spread a more bike-friendly atmosphere by holding a competition among European cities: whoever covers the highest number of miles by cycling in the month of May wins.

San Lazzaro di Savena is also famous for the something else: the "Fira ed San Lazar" (San Lazzaro Fair), which celebrated its 189th birthday this year. This country fair is featured in a traditional song from Bologna made popular by the well-known singer-songwriter Francesco Guccini. On the cover you can find two lines from the song: *'A san stè a la Fiera di S. Làsaro, oili, oilà, a' i' ò cumpré du' bêl pìsòn, com'èren bêl, com'èren bôn'.* ('I went to the San Lazzaro fair, oi-y-lee, oi-y-la, I bought two nice doves, how handsome they were, how good they were!'). Click [here](#) to enjoy the song.

Mariella Palazzolo



Isabella Conti has been the Mayor of San Lazzaro di Savena (BO) since 2014 and was re-elected in May 2019 with over 80% of the votes.

Of the numerous projects that have distinguished her administration, she is most known for having made day-care free starting from September 2019: San Lazzaro di Savena is the first municipality in Italy to ensure everyone has access to free day-care. From 2013 until she was elected mayor, she was a councillor for the Budget, Patrimony and Productive activities. She has been in politics since she was very young: first, as a militant in the Sinistra Giovanile (Young Left), then as a member of the Democratic Party (PD). She held her first government office in 2004 when at only 22 years of age she was elected to the San Lazzaro City Council.

In October 2019 she joined Italia Viva (Alive Italy), the party founded by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. She is also a member of the steering committee of the Italian environmental organisation Legambiente. She was awarded the Angelo Vassallo Prize sponsored by Legambiente, the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI), the anti-mafia organisation Libera and others in memory of the *Fisherman Mayor* from Pollica who was killed in an attack by the Camorra. She was awarded this prize for promoting the development of her local area through inclusive policies that respect the environment and lawfulness.

She has a degree in Law from the University of Bologna and passed the bar in November 2010. She worked as a lawyer in a firm set up with two other colleagues until she was elected Mayor. She continues to study juridical topics connected with public, urban planning and company law so she can go back to being a lawyer once her

experience politics is over. Born in Bologna, she is 37 years old and married. Before being Mayor, she cultivated a wide range of passions and interests: music, reading, travel, poetry, photography and dance. She speaks and writes in Portuguese, English and Spanish.

Marco Sonsini

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