When Gianni de Michelis, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Italy, attended a semi-official NATO anniversary conference organized by Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies, and held with some formality at the Palais d’Enghien in Brussels, he was accompanied by a handsome blonde with unspecified duties on the state-owned ENI or possibly the Socialist Party of Italy payroll; a brunette with unspecified duties on the state-owned ENI or possibly the Socialist Party of Italy payroll; several personal political aides (he had added some three hundred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs payroll as opposed to the usual dozen); and a larger train of both diplomats and seconded military officers than any other attending NATO minister or uniformed potentate, including the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe—even though that exalted rank is much noted for the imperial magnitude of its escorting staff.

When Gianni de Michelis, then still Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Italy, attended the semi-official October Conference of the Pio Manzu Research Center held in some luxury at the five-star Grand Hotel of Rimini (an Italian Torremolinos in the summer, but Fellini-fashionable in the autumn), he brought with him just one very tall brunette with unspecified duties on the Socialist Party payroll, but so many other camp-followers that they half-filled the vast Paradiso disco-restaurant in the Rimini hills, where he celebrated till early morning, as was his wont. (During his tenure, it was an actual part of the duties of Italian embassies everywhere to select a suitable all-night disco when preparing for a ministerial visit.)

When Gianni de Michelis took a break from his duties as minister of foreign affairs, or as vice-president of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Italy, to dine informally in a fashionable restaurant, as he did almost every evening when in Rome, he never sat down without at least a baker’s dozen at his table, including at least one person of the opposite sex with unspecified duties but on a state or Socialist Party payroll; several grateful beneficiaries of his power to appoint senior executives in state-owned enterprises, presidents of state-controlled banks, under-secretaries in government departments, and members of some of the best-remunerated state boards for this, that and the other, and at least one would-be beneficiary of his alleged power to distribute government largesse by way of contracts, a role which included, ex officio as it were, the payment of the routinely colossal bill (a huge 300-pound, six-footer-plus, de Michelis was an expensive guest all by himself, as he never was, for he combined a gourmand’s appetite with a gourmet’s insistence on expensive delicacies and costly labels).

But it was in his own Venice fiefdom that Gianni de Michelis most truly resembled an Oriental potentate. The president of the United States can launch 19,999 thermonuclear weapons against whatever country happens to irritate him, and even the British MP has the SAS at his beck and call, as well as the odd armoured division, what is left of the Royal Navy, and a few nukes of his own. But both are in every other way pathetically impotent by comparison with de Michelis before all the rules abruptly changed in Italy. He did not have to be in Venice to enrich favorites at will.
George Bush could not even keep two of his own sons from bankruptcy) or to have beautiful women in pairs overlook and presumably service his spectacular ugliness (Major, an Adonis by comparison, can only dream of such rewards). But it was only in Venice that de Michelis could be roundly dominant, for there he had to share his powers with fewer of the other ci-devant masters of Italy.

At their more arcane, those powers supposedly ranged from such petty things as the issue of water-taxi licenses (as his presumed protégés, the licensees habitually violated the no-wake speed limit with impunity, inflicting lethal damage on Venetian foundation piles), to an allegedly most remunerative influence on awarding major government contracts for highways, bridges, port installations, water-treatment plants, and suchlike. (His political secretary and formerly inseparable alter ego, Giorgio Casadei, has been in prison for months, charged with receiving numerous mega-bribes; and orders have also been issued for the arrest of his personal secretary, Barbara Ceolin, who has evaded capture so far.)

De Michelis did not, however, lack the kind of power that can be displayed openly, to the naked eye, in true princely fashion. The same Venetians who loudly cursed his exit from the Piazza San Marco court where he was summoned to testify in March of 1993 on one of very many corruption charges, had for years been his eagerly servile audience at art exhibition openings, restored palace inaugurations, prestige conferences, and all otherwise notable gatherings held in Venice. None was deemed a success unless Gianni de Michelis arrived with his attendant courtesans, aides, media admirers, and hopeful petitioners, to speak the speech, in which he would generously instruct artists on art, architects on architecture, economists on economics, town-planners on planning, philosophers on philosophy, and micro-neurosurgeons on micro-neurosurgery.

None of this means that de Michelis was the worst specimen of that political class which is now, in its entirety, headed for oblivion, if not prison. On the contrary, he was one of the very best. Not merely cunning in the manner of all successful politicians, not merely clever as better politicians are, not merely highly intelligent, but a man of true intellectual ability, de Michelis was perfectly capable of speaking interestingly on architecture, economics, town-planning, philosophy, and perhaps even micro-neurosurgery, and of course world politics (nobody could speak usefully about Italian politics). Since the deluge, some of the Italian journalists who most eagerly courted his favor have ridiculed his Mediterranean cooperation scheme, his concept of European integration, his views on North-South relations. Strongly expressed and significantly original, they were indeed controversial ideas, which I for one mostly disagreed with, but they were certainly not trivial ideas. Compared with most of his colleagues in Italy and in Europe, except for Sweden's Carl Bilt and, of course, Václav Havel, de Michelis stood out as an intellectual giant. Nor has any crime of any sort been proven against him in any court of law, so far. It is possible that he only took money for his party; it is even possible that he took no money at all. Though the magistrates must believe otherwise, for why else would they keep his man Casadio in jail to make him talk?

Display of arrogance was evidently seen by politicians as a test of in-your-face electoral machismo.

De Michelis did, however, exemplify the sheer arrogance of Italy's political class by the eve of its downfall. For along with the transformation of old-style political corruption from the quiet goings-on of the past to the flamboyant corruption of the 1980s, displays of arrogance had become a definite fashion among politicians—they were evidently seen by them as a test of in-your-face electoral machismo. Thus De Michelis liked his hair long and unkempt, and long and unkempt it was. De Michelis liked to be escorted by beautiful women, and by them he was escorted, even at formal state functions. De Michelis liked to disco-dance till he was drenched in sweat, and sweat he did in discos everywhere, even while on official visits abroad.

None of the above is a crime, but all served to proclaim a unique exemption from the conformities to which democratic politicians are everywhere subject. Italians are most broadly tolerant, caring not a fig if a member of parliament or a minister has extra-marital or non-marital affairs, whether hetero- or homosexual, or even enthusiastically quasi-pederastic in one famous case. Not for them the prompt disgrace of whoever is caught in a bush with a guardsman. (Italy has its own corazzieri: they, too, are fit young men stationed in the heart of metropolitan temptations with scant pocket money.) Of lesser appetites they are even more tolerant. But Italians do expect a modicum of discretion. And they are sufficiently respectful of foreign