Milan, March 24, 2014

Professor Douglass North  
Washington University in St Louis  
and  
cc: Prof. Robert C. Allen, Stephen Broadberry, Gregory Clark, Nicholas Crafts, Jane Humphries, Deirdre McCloskey, Joel Mokyr, Kevin O’Rourke, Leandro Prados de la Escosura, Jan Luiten Van Zanden, and Jeffrey G. Williamson

Dear Professor North,

I address this open letter (by which I mean that each recipient is free to share it as he sees fit) to the most senior of those who signed the letter recently sent to Italy’s Prime Minister and the Minister for Universities commenting on the situation of Economic History in this country. I also address this letter to you in virtue of the long-standing friendship we shared with Alfred Chandler. The divulgation of Chandler’s works in Italy—in cooperation with some of the best centers in the world—has been one of the key objectives in my scholarly career as I work to assure that there is a solid framework for business history in my country.

As regards the letter signed by you and other esteemed international colleagues: yes, it’s fair to say that some talented scholars were denied “abilitazione” (qualification) in the latest round. And I’m not just referring to the three mentioned in your letter (one of whom, in the course of a job market seminar he led at my university a few years ago, did not provide the hiring committee with an entirely convincing presentation). It’s possible to question the outcome of the evaluating committee’s work provided that all the reports of the proceedings (as they include an explanation of the decisions taken) have been examined. Just as it’s also a basic obligation to have looked at the works of the “candidates with a very limited track record of research” (and here it would be helpful to know the names of those labeled as such) without basing your opinion exclusively to the number of citations mentioned in Google Scholar. I hope that all of you—especially everyone who doesn’t have a working knowledge of Italian—were at least supplied with detailed summaries of the relevant documentation.

I truly hope that all of you were well briefed on the issue before signing that letter to Prime Minister Renzi and to Minister Giannini. Otherwise, your support could be perceived as taking sides in the academic affairs of a nation and a discipline that produced scholars like Gino Luzzatto, Carlo Cipolla, and Aldo DeMaddalena. If this should be the case, your letter ends up making it more difficult for those of us hard at work in bringing Italian economic history to the international forefront.

Professor North, I am sure that you and the other colleagues who signed that letter did so in good faith. But the reality is that your initiative risks having a detrimental effect on the campaign to render our discipline a stronger one in Italy. In addition, your affirmations are unfair to the many colleagues who earned—and very much merit—their qualifications in this round.

Here in Italy, a growing group of scholars with a good number of citations co-exists with some outstanding colleagues who vaunt few international citations (almost always by virtue of their fields of research). Let’s not damage the “internationalization” of the latter; as happens in other European nations, the process is both irreversible as well as gradual for some. Much depends on us,
on our ability to take part in a dialogue that isn’t shaped by labels separating “cliometricians-quants” from the “others”; I am confident that all of us are eager to assure that there’s a real exchange between scholars of different schools of thought.

In closing, you and your colleagues need not be worried: no one (and I mean it!) can put restraints on the future development and direction of the research agendas of scholars like Dincecco, Nuvolari, and Vecchi.

With my best regards,

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