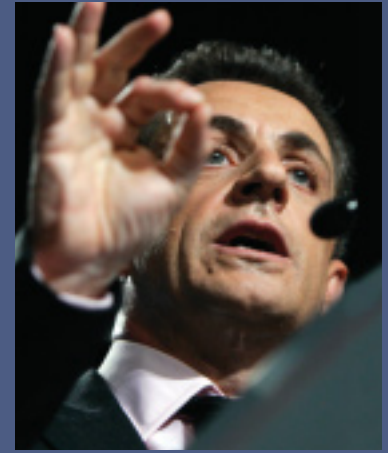


MAL À DROITE: CAN SARKOZY RIGHT WHAT'S WRONG WITH FRANCE?

Tasha Kheiriddin

In the most significant French presidential election since François Mitterrand and the left took power in 1981, Nicolas Sarkozy and the right triumphed in 2007. The margin was decisive over Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal. And the mandate was clear — put France back to work, or at least change the way it works by ending the culture of labour entitlement and encouraging entrepreneurship and employment. Tasha Kheiriddin, a leading authority on the conservative movement in Canada, was in Paris during the final days of the presidential campaign and shares this assessment of *l'effet Sarkozy*.

À l'issue des élections présidentielles françaises les plus significatives depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de François Mitterrand et de la gauche en 1981, Nicolas Sarkozy et la droite ont triomphé en 2007 avec une avance décisive sur la candidate socialiste Ségolène Royal. Une victoire assortie d'un mandat sans appel : remettre la France au travail, ou à tout le moins changer sa façon de travailler en mettant fin à une culture de droits acquis et en stimulant l'entrepreneuriat et l'emploi. Spécialiste du mouvement conservateur canadien, Tasha Kheiriddin se trouvait à Paris aux derniers jours de la campagne présidentielle et propose une analyse de l'« effet Sarkozy ».



Saturday in Paris, one week before the French presidential election. Returning to my hotel after attending a conference at Sorbonne University, I noticed in the lobby that the elevator had stopped working. A disturbing development, considering that my room — and my ever-expanding luggage — sat high above me on the third floor. Asked when the lift would be fixed, the concierge responded with an insouciant Gallic shrug that nothing could be done until Tuesday. Apparently, it was Labour Day weekend in France, and thus it would be impossible to find a repairman. So the only option was ... to climb the stairs.

Compared with some other guests', my hardship proved to be minor. It is still not clear what happened to the elderly English ladies staying on the seventh floor, who had probably not walked more than 20 paces in as many years. But for the management, this did not seem to matter. It was perfectly normal that a hotel full of guests be inconvenienced, rather than disturb an elevator repairman on a long weekend. Besides which, according to the concierge, there were apparently none to disturb, as they were either out of town or would not even consider working on a statutory holiday.

In that moment, it became very clear just what the right-of-centre presidential candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, would be up against if he became *président de la république*.

And why his ultimately successful campaign roused such passions and divisions in what turned out to be the most important French election of the last 30 years.

France in 2007 is a country where work is, if not a completely dirty word, admittedly in need of a good *débarbouillette*. Restrictive labour market regulations, generous unemployment benefits, high taxes and the 35-hour week have eroded both the employee's will to work and the employer's incentive to create new jobs. Productivity has suffered in consequence. In 25 years, France has slipped from 7th to 17th place in terms of per capita GDP. The *Economist* magazine recently reported that in the fourth quarter of 2006, on a year-on-year basis, GDP grew more slowly in France than in any other European Union country except Portugal.

For young people, particularly the children of immigrants, the situation is particularly dire. Youth unemployment stands at 20 percent, double the rate of youth unemployment in the United States and more than twice the general French unemployment rate of 8.3 percent. In the immigrant *banlieues*, 40 percent of young people are without jobs. Yet last year when the government proposed legislation that would have made it easier to hire — and fire

— young workers, they took to the streets and the bill was withdrawn. A predictable paradox: while deriding the established order, for the lucky few who get a piece of it, membership has its privileges, and woe betide the politicians who would take them away.

In a 22-country study conducted in 2005 by Globescan, an international public opinion firm, France was the only nation where a majority of respondents disagreed with the statement that “the free market economy is the best system on which to base the future of the world.” Only 36 percent of French respondents agreed, compared with 74 percent of Chinese, 71 percent of American, 66 percent of British and 65 percent of Canadian respondents.

This attitude partly stems from the prevailing orthodoxy described in France as “the legacy of 1968,” which permeates the teaching of economics as much as all other subjects. In an interview given in April 2006 to the *International Herald Tribune*, Jean-Pierre Boisivon, director of the Enterprise Institute, which sponsors an internship program for economics teachers, asserted that “in France we are still stuck in 1970s Keynesian-style economics — we live in the world of 30 years ago ... In our schools we fabricate a vision of society that is very different from the one that exists in other countries.”

Nineteen sixty-eight was a seminal year in French politics, a year of revolt, massive strikes, student protests and rebellion against the established order, a year which decisively entrenched socialism into the political and cultural fabric. French author Eric Brunet recently documented the effects of this entrenchment in *Être de Droite: Un Tabou français* (Being Right: A French Taboo). The book became a bestseller in 2006 and went to three printings. It specifically addresses the legacy of

1968 in a chapter entitled “Les soixante-huitards, le retour” (The return of the 68’ers).

Brunet observes that after 1968, inequality, not ignorance, came to be considered the greatest social ill in France. As a result, intellectual life stagnated and was replaced with a social imperative — France’s version of political correctness. To proclaim oneself *de droite* became both taboo and a barrier to personal advancement in the arts, culture, media, academia and politics. The result today is a prevailing left-of-centre orthodoxy that nobody dares challenge for fear of exclusion, ostracism and unemployment.

Brunet cites many statistics to support his claim, including a 2001 study by the magazine *Marianne* in which only 6 percent of French journalists described themselves as right-of-centre. Among academics, a 2002 survey by Cevipof (Centre d’étude de la vie politique française) revealed

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that 75 percent of professors voted for left-wing candidates, with 16 percent voting for hard-left candidates. And it’s not just the media or the schools — even politicians are afraid to show their colours. In this respect, as Brunet told the online journal *Internaute*, “Sarkozy is extraordinary. Whether one likes him or not, what he is doing is incredible in French society. When one thinks that Jacques Chirac never publicly said ‘I am right-wing,’ one can only admire this man who affirms his values loud and clear.”

Sarkozy is indeed unique in that he has openly challenged what he calls “the moral and intellectual relativism” of 1968. At a campaign rally in Bercy the week before the final vote, he exhorted the crowd of supporters, 40,000 strong:

See how the heritage of May 1968 introduced cynicism into society and politics ... Look at the left that since May 1968 has renounced merit and effort ... Listen to the inheritors of May 1968 who ... denigrate national identity, who feed the hatred of the family, of society, of the State, of the nation, of the Republic ... I want to turn the page from May 1968.

Thanks in part to *l’effet Sarkozy*, there are now signs the tide is turning, and that more and more French public figures are comfortable breaking political taboos. In a spectacle never before seen in French politics,

Sarkozy’s speech was preceded by a dozen entertainers literally singing his praises, including performances and speeches from legendary vocalists Gilbert Montagne and Henri Salvador, Algerian *rai* star Faudel and comedian Jean-Marie Bigard. By the time the main attraction took the stage, the crowd was worked up into a frenzy more befitting a rock star than a politician.

Throughout the campaign, Sarkozy also promised economic reforms to rehabilitate and reward the work

ethic. He proposed to exempt overtime from income and payroll taxes, roll back personal tax levels from 60 to 50 percent, and liberalize labour laws. He promised to create work-for-welfare programs for youth in the *banlieues*. He also pledged to include essential services provisions in labour contracts with transportation workers — a radical step in a country where the public sector's right to strike is sacrosanct.

Interviewed at the Bercy rally, Sebastien Huyghe, French member of Parliament for le Nord Antoine Gosset-Grainville, said bluntly, "He's the only candidate who can give France back the ability to produce wealth." Olivier Viail, delegate-general of Students for Sarkozy, added, "Sarkozy will reward merit. The left thinks youth are either dependent on the state or hell-raisers in the suburbs. We want to work and be rewarded for it."

What are the roots of Sarkozy's drive, of his ideas, of his fierce respect for the work ethic? The answer lies in the forces that shaped his early years, laying the groundwork for his rise to political prominence.

Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy de Nagy-Bocsa was born in 1955 in the 17th arrondissement of Paris, to a Hungarian father of aristocratic background and a mother of French and Jewish descent. His father fled his homeland after the Communists invaded in 1945; he met his wife-to-be in France and they had three sons, Nicolas, Guillaume and François. In 1959 Sarkozy's father left his family, remarried and had two more children. Despite his father's business success, he failed to provide support; later in life, Sarkozy would assist his mother in suing his father for alimony. His paternal abandonment, the family's ensuing poverty (they depended on his maternal grandfather) and a persistent insecurity about his height (he is five feet, five

inches tall) marked the young man for life. Sarkozy has stated, "I was fashioned by the humiliations of childhood."

Sarkozy went on to obtain his law degree and became active in right-wing politics in university, eventually catching the eye and support of then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. At the age of 22 he became a member of the town council of the upscale Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine. He later shocked the Gaullist political establishment by defeating a party favourite to become the youngest mayor in France in 1983 at the age of 28.

In 1993, Sarkozy came to national

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attention in a stunning display of personal courage. A madman calling himself "the human bomb" took children hostage in a local school. Sarkozy directly negotiated with the bomber the release of one child; the police killed the man and the remaining children were unharmed.

Sarkozy subsequently served as budget minister under Prime Minister Édouard Balladur but then fell into disfavour with Chirac after backing Balladur's rival for the presidency. After Sarkozy was shut out of the circles of power for several years, Chirac brought him back into government as interior minister in 2002. In 2004 he served as finance minister and oversaw

the government's bailout of engineering multinational Alstom, revealing an interventionist side of his otherwise free-market economic philosophy.

In 2004, after Sarkozy was elected head of Chirac's party, the UMP, Chirac took the unusual step of asking him to resign from the government, but he reappointed him as interior minister in 2005. It was during this time that Sarkozy dealt with his most difficult political crisis: the uprising in the *banlieues* of Paris. In October of that year rioters burned over 200 public buildings and 10,000 cars in the worst spate of violence France had seen in 40 years. Displaying the tough law-and-order stance that has become a hallmark of his leadership, Sarkozy called the perpetrators "scum," initiated a massive police crackdown and pledged to tighten immigration laws.

The crisis prompted an intense re-examination of the way France deals with immigrants, the question of national identity and how many foreigners the country can realistically absorb. Currently 1 in 12 residents of France — 4.9 million people — is foreign-born. Of these, 2 million have acquired French citizenship, with 1 million doing so between 1999 and 2005 alone. Sixty percent of these immigrants live in one of three metropolitan areas: Île-de-France (the *banlieues* around Paris), Rhône Alpes, and Provence Côte d'Azur. One in eight residents in Île-de-France is not a French citizen. It is also estimated that there are 200,000 to 400,000 illegal immigrants within France's borders.

During his presidential campaign, Sarkozy promised to overhaul the immigration system and act to deport illegals. He also pledged to create a "ministry of immigration and national identity," a first for the country, which was seized on by the left as evidence of xenophobic and racist



Reuters

Nicolas Sarkozy's victory in the May 6 election was a triumph of determination, writes Tasha Kheiriddin. He openly talks about putting France back to work, or at least changing the way it works.

tendencies in both his rhetoric and his party. Yet following the election, in a survey published in *Le Figaro* newspaper, 72 percent of French respondents said they would approve of the new ministry's creation.

Minority and immigrant Sarkozy supporters also told another side of the story. They voted for him for his policies, including his stances on immigration. At the rally in Bercy, 14-year-old volunteer Noémie Bristol, who is black, said, "He has better ideas than [Ségolène Royal] does, and she made too many mistakes." Noémie disagreed that he is "anti-immigrant," as did fellow attendee Fatiha Khemiri, who supported him because of his program: "working more to earn more, and

penalties for repeat offenders." She added, "He's against immigrants who do nothing and wait to be helped. And so am I."

The night Sarkozy triumphed at the polls on Sunday, May 6, several thousand protesters turned out in the streets of Paris, Lyons, Marseilles, Nantes, Toulouse and Rennes. Nearly 600 people were arrested and 730 cars were set on fire. Sarkozy's Socialist opposition and the media had predicted much worse — riots, strikes, even civil unrest. In the days that followed, his critics further savaged him for taking a brief holiday with his wife and son aboard a private yacht, owned by an industrialist friend of the family.

A seemingly calamitous beginning, but since then, Sarkozy has displayed a keen sense of political acumen and bridge building. In naming his first cabinet, he cut the number of ministries in half, filling nearly half the posts with women, a first for France. In an unexpected display of bipartisanship, he named Socialist human rights advocate Bernard Kouchner, founder of Doctors without Borders, to the post of foreign minister. While the two share a pro-American view of foreign policy, their political similarities end there. Apart from their left-right divide, Kouchner supported military intervention in Iraq while Sarkozy opposed it, and unlike his new boss Kouchner advocates Turkey's inclusion in the European Union.

Sarkozy also reached out to immigrant communities, naming the first minister of North African descent, Rachida Dati, of Moroccan heritage, to the post of justice minister. At the same time, Sarkozy made good on his campaign promise to

simply *président* — when describing his aspirations.

Sarkozy has critics on the right as well, who fear that his free-market rhetoric will be diluted by propensities for interventionism and protectionism. During the campaign,

Statements like these have led Cécile Philippe, head of the French think tank l'Institut Molinari, to comment that “he is very interventionist. He wants a strong state that meddles in the workings of business. Even *The Economist*, which is nonetheless very bullish on his election, describing it as “mercifully, a fresh start for France,” cautions that he “made some unwise promises during his campaign, with populist talk of interventionist industrial policy and of new protectionism.”

But the night of his victory, Sarkozy sounded like a man very clear on his mission. He proclaimed, “The French people have

expressed themselves. They have chosen to break with the ideas, habits and behaviours of the past. I will rehabilitate work, authority, morality and respect. I will return honour to the Nation and our national identity. But I will do it with all the French.” As he moves forward, it remains to be seen whether they will join with him in his quest, or

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create the new Ministry of Immigration and National Identity, to which he appointed Brice Hortefeux, his long-time friend and ally. Hortefeux has since stated that he would act with “firmness and humanity” in dealing with issues such as the deportation of illegal immigrants.

Sarkozy railed repeatedly against the immorality of capitalism, “the triumph of the predator on the entrepreneur, the speculator on the worker.” He berated bosses who get golden parachutes while thousands of workers are laid off. He told a French political talk show host that he wants to encourage “domestic

Will Sarkozy be the autocrat feared by his left-of-centre critics, or will he turn his strength to an advantage in dealing with France's economic and social problems? Through out the campaign, one of his critics' favourite targets was his sense of innate authority. More than one writer has compared him to Napoleon, and not just because of his height. The lobby of his Paris campaign headquarters was dominated by a severe, unsmiling portrait of the candidate that was taller than the candidate himself. And in interviews, Sarkozy never tired of using the more lofty-sounding phrase *président de la république* — as opposed to

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capital” to invest in France because it is less likely to outsource jobs than foreign-owned multinationals. When pressed on whether he would forcibly prevent firms from moving their factories to China, he responded only that he would give workers a year of 90 percent of their salary if they engage in retraining.

whether the ghosts of 1968 will continue to haunt France into the 21st century.

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