



# Testimony

The English version of the bestselling *Témoignage*  
by Nicolas Sarkozy

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# Introductory notes

by Robert Harneis

## Nicolas Sarkozy and the French presidential elections in 2007

Nicolas Sarkozy is not a typical figure in French politics. His father was an aristocratic Hungarian immigrant who in 1944 escaped from Budapest aged 16, as the Soviet army arrived. He wandered across Europe until he reached French-occupied Baden Baden in Germany, where he joined the Foreign Legion. When he left the army he founded a successful publicity business in Paris and, aged 21, married Andrée Mallah, the daughter of a Jewish doctor from Salonica. They were divorced in 1959. To support the family his mother then qualified as an advocate and built up a successful practice.

Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sárközy de Nagy-Bócsa was born on 28th January 1955, in the 17th *arrondissement* in Paris, where he was brought up. He has two brothers. In 1996 he married his second wife Cécilia, who is referred to in the book as C. Unlike almost all of his senior colleagues and opponents he did not go to the elite French school for top administrators, the *Ecole Nationale de l'Administration*. He is therefore not what is known as an *Enarque*. As he says, he came up through the ranks of the party and at the same time had a successful career as a lawyer.

He has immense drive and is a highly skilled communicator. He is also a considerable orator. In debate in the Chamber of the National Assembly or on television he demonstrates remarkable mental agility. He is the only politician to have been asked on to the very popular political programme '*100 minutes pour convaincre*' three times, where he achieved record audiences – 7.2 million on one occasion. He has the gift of making politics interesting and since his intention of standing for President became obvious, public opinion polls showed interest in the

2007 elections rising from typical levels of 40% to over 60%. Since he took over as President of the UMP membership has risen from 120,000 to 283,000, an extraordinary rise in a short time. He was voted one of the European Achievers of the Year in 2006 for “putting forward the clearest vision for the future of Europe yet to emerge from France”.

## The elections

French presidential elections are usually close. The main problem is that in order to win 51% of the votes the candidate on the Right must satisfy his own right of centre electorate *and* that of the extreme right at the same time. The Left's candidate has the same problem in reverse – the centre left Socialists must in their turn enlist the support of the Communists, the Greens and the assorted extreme Left, to win. The electorate can also choose the President from one side of the political divide and the parliamentary majority a month later from the other. There has been an assumption that as the two elections (presidential and parliamentary) are now held close together that the result would be the same, as was the case in 2002. It need not be so.

## The book

Like its author, *Témoignage* is out of the ordinary. First of all, it is a best seller. It is hardly necessary to say that this is unusual for a book about politics in any country. French politicians all write books, but most of them achieve sales of at most a few thousand. By October 2006 the print run for *Témoignage* had reached 310,000. Political opponents have been quick to claim that the sales were puffed, copies were given away, and so on. All this may be true but it is also true of less successful rival political books. To put the figure into perspective, the average book on politics published in France sells 8,265 copies.

Conventional political wisdom today is that no one reads party political manifestos. Sarkozy has thus defied conventional wisdom. Hundreds of thousands of people have bought the

book, and many of them will actually have read it. The book is not a manifesto as such but, as he says, it sets out “what I wanted to do, what I want to do in the future and, beyond that, what can be done”. In effect, many electors had read his manifesto before the presidential election had even begun. In an age when people read less and less, that alone is a unique achievement and makes the book worthy of the attention of politicians and political scientists who, in the words of veteran British radio broadcaster John Humphrys, have concluded that “in the age of the image and the sound bite the argument contained in a manifesto has less potential for winning votes than other tricks of presentation”. At the same time, anyone who wants to know how Sarkozy is likely to approach any given area of policy will find the answer here.

The book also sets out the whys and wherefores of the main events and controversies of his recent ministerial career. Of course it is his view and not everybody will agree with it. Be that as it may, the incidental result is a fascinating insight into the life of a minister at work in France today, at grips with the endless day-to-day political problems. Equally important, the book is a study of the problem of government in a modern, complex society. It answers the question of how to introduce changes when there is so little room for manoeuvre. Every Western democratic government is faced with this puzzle. Sarkozy has analysed the problem and, as a senior departmental minister at the Ministry of the Interior and for a brief period Finance, put his ideas into practice, not without success. At any rate it would be difficult to maintain that his campaign against road deaths and his saving of Alstom were failures. They were also clearly undertaken on barren political soil against a background of hostility from certain colleagues, notably the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, who at one time saw himself as the Right's candidate for the next presidential elections. So the book is also a how-to manual. How to deal with the European Union, a big Ministry, keeping in touch with the real world, the media, getting measures agreed, performance-based political management and much else is freely discussed. These are crucial issues for any modern government.

The book should be read against the background of the rivalry between Sarkozy and Chirac. Sarkozy was the natural choice for Prime Minister during the Chirac presidency, but Chirac realised that he would not be the docile political bedfellow that he sought. Neither of Chirac's two Prime Ministers have their own independent base of electoral support, and Dominique de Villepin has never fought an election, although he emerged for a while as a potential rival to run for the presidency. Some see the series of appointments that Sarkozy has held as an obstacle course set for him by a President who was also a jealous rival. Sarkozy does not say this himself, but if it is true that he was meant to fail at Interior (like so many of his predecessors), sink into oblivion at Finance and lose his way in having to decide whether he would become President of his party or remain in the government, then he overcame all these obstacles with a degree of panache that must have enraged his enemies. The rivalry goes back to 1995 when Edouard Balladur stood against Chirac for the Presidency. Sarkozy supported Balladur. But the differences between the two men are not just personal, as the book makes clear. Sarkozy wants root and branch reform – *la rupture* – whereas Chirac is much more consensual.

The book is also a political benchmark. In every important area of policy it sets out, with supporting argument, what should be done regarding: immigration, taxation, education, constitutional reform, international relations, Europe and globalisation. The list is long. Whatever fate holds in store for Nicolas Sarkozy, France's political class are going to have to deal with the issues raised here with such clarity, because the book is a scorching indictment of the *immobilisme* of the entire French political class, including his own party. Especially his own party.

Finally the book is a very personal statement, although it is in no way a biography. Sarkozy talks of his childhood, his troubled marriage and his notoriously difficult relationship with Jacques Chirac. His frank, generous assessment of Chirac is interesting, and whilst Sarkozy's criticisms of Chirac are always uncompromising, they are never discourteous.

## Some recent political history

Nicolas Sarkozy's political career since 2002 and the return of the Right to government has been out of the ordinary. He first took on the Ministry of the Interior where he was the inspiration behind the drive to reduce road deaths – achieving the unlikely feat of reducing the annual total from over 8,000 to under 5,000 in two years. Anyone who has driven on French roads will appreciate the extent of this achievement. Sarkozy has been active, not without controversy, in fighting crime and insecurity and in combating illegal immigration. The Ministry of the Interior has in the past been a graveyard of political ambition. He made it a springboard for a presidential campaign.

Sarkozy's short stay at the Ministry of Finance, not known for providing scope for popular politics, was equally successful. The highlights were the agreement to reduce supermarket prices and the saving of Alstom. Alstom was a major company that clearly would have failed without his intervention and is today again successful. As at the Interior, Sarkozy's restless energy succeeded in shaking up the administration.

Ever since he joined the government Sarkozy made it clear that he intended to run for the office of President. This put him in a position of competing with President Chirac, who clearly intended to keep open the option of running for a third term himself. It was therefore no surprise that when the opportunity to become President of the recently united UMP arose Sarkozy wanted to take it. It is equally unsurprising that President Chirac did not want him to take control of this vital political organisation. Chirac therefore presented him with the choice of remaining as a minister or becoming President of the UMP. One allowed Sarkozy to remain in the public eye and the other to get control of a vital organisation for fighting the election campaign. He chose the UMP and resigned as minister. In the event he retained his high level of popularity in the country and the party.

The failure of the government campaign in favour of a Yes vote in the referendum on the European Constitution gravely weakened President Chirac and the Raffarin government. When

Chirac decided to change Prime Minister he appointed former Foreign Secretary Dominique de Villepin. Nicolas Sarkozy agreed to return to the Ministry of the Interior but this time as Deputy Prime Minister and successfully insisted on staying on as President of the UMP and, for good measure, as President of the Haut-de-Seine *Conseil-Général*, the body that runs the administration of the department.

A notable feature of Sarkozy's second spell in government was his rivalry with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who on appointment was at first very popular and showed signs of wanting to be the presidential candidate himself. De Villepin's ambitions were severely curtailed by the fallout from the fiasco over the introduction of the CPE youth employment contract and his apparent involvement in – or ambivalence regarding – the Clearstream plot to damage the reputation of Sarkozy and others. De Villepin at one time seemed to support Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie as another possible rival, even going so far as to suggest that a member of the UMP might stand against the party's choice.

Sarkozy has achieved the remarkable feat of being a leading member of the government yet remaining detached from it. Some of his supporters saw his return to government as dangerous for his chances as presidential candidate. However, as he writes in this book, he did not think it was possible to remain outside the government for two years to be, as he puts it, merely a Minister of Talk.

Since 2002 Nicolas Sarkozy has been at the forefront of government action and at the same time Chirac's most virulent critic. Ironically, the President's thinly disguised hostility made this balancing act easier. After all, under the French constitution it is the President who chooses the ministers and Sarkozy each time accepted office on the understanding that he would be free to say what he thought. His immense popularity in the party presented the President with the classic political dilemma of deciding whether it was safer to leave him out or bring him in. Chirac's own political weakness decided the issue and enabled Sarkozy to insist on maintaining his independence. The

publishing of *Témoignage* was a key element in his campaign to retain his independence and get his views across. At the same time, it is a clear presentation of the key issues that will face France in the post-Chirac era.

### **Notes on the text**

The translation of *Témoignage* has resulted in the usual battle between an exact translation and flowing English. The footnotes to the text have been added to assist the reader where I thought the context might be helpful. Appendices have been added at the end of the book, setting out the basic rules for a French Presidential election, some important dates in the political career of Nicolas Sarkozy, and a brief summary of his other books.

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