

The shadow of a doubt about Sarkozy

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Published: September 14 2007 03:00 | Last updated: September 14 2007 03:00

Nicolas Sarkozy's period of grace goes on. When Mr Sarkozy became president, the encephalogram of the country was flat: he has instilled a sense of life. From Washington to Brussels, in the Middle East and central Europe, France is back - maybe too much so if one believes rumours from Germany of tension between Paris and Berlin. There is sometimes the impression of a country moving from too little to too much too soon.

Yet if the president continues to enjoy wide popular support, there is within the French elite - especially among those who strongly supported his candidacy - something like a shadow of a doubt. Is this just a temporary mood, inevitable among elites who are too ready to burn today what they praised yesterday? Or could it be something deeper, an apprehension not so much at what the president does but at what the president is?

On the domestic front, the new president has amply demonstrated his acute political talent, first by destroying the extreme right during the election and then by further destabilising the left by attracting some of its key figures, such as Bernard Kouchner, the new minister of foreign affairs, into his government. There is not a single topic from justice to security, education to labour laws, that Mr Sarkozy has not touched, often with audacity and originality. Reforms may be too slow for some but, for the most part, they are set to be implemented in due course.

The growing sense of doubt about Mr Sarkozy among French elites is due to the interaction of several factors. The first is external. Three months ago, Mr Sarkozy's election coincided with favourable demographic and economic conditions. The generation of baby boomers going into retirement will help Mr Sarkozy reduce the number of civil servants in a drastic way. A significant proportion of those who are leaving will not be replaced. That still holds true. By contrast, the economic situation has brutally turned around. Is France strong enough to fare well in the present tempest, especially if the rate of growth of the French economy falls below 2 per cent?

But beyond this international economic context, which is beyond the control of the new president, there is unease about Mr Sarkozy. His media-obsessed style was natural for a candidate but it is problematic for a president. Can he last five years being everywhere at the same time, creating events every day? When is the president finding time to reflect and to study? He must learn that, for a president, less is more.

But more problematic than the question of style is one of content. Described as a "liberal Colbertist" by some, Mr Sarkozy has in his first 100 days proven to be much more Colbertist than liberal. Even when he does the right thing and achieves the right results, as in the recent merger between Suez and GdF, he does so in the most heavy-handed, state-interventionist manner.

Mr Sarkozy's attacks on Jean-Claude Trichet, president of the European Central Bank, are excessive. They are also destabilising, not only for the ECB but for the key Franco-German relationship. One can understand the political logic behind such an attitude. If you are attempting to reconcile the French people with Europe after the failure of the referendum on the constitutional treaty in 2005, you will try to convince them that France is in control and that Europe is working for them. Two decades ago what was good for Europe was seen as good for France. Today, is what is good for France necessarily good for Europe? The emphasis has changed and not for the better.

On European issues, Mr Sarkozy is simultaneously part of the solution, as when he advances the limited treaty scheme, and part of the problem, when he steals the show from the European Union after the liberation of the Bulgarian nurses in Libya.

But beyond all this lies something deeper: an existential question. Can Mr Sarkozy, the consummate politician, combine calmness and energy, dynamism and serenity, self-control and imagination?

The cult of rugby, which is the celebration of the collective spirit over the power of the individual, is being celebrated in France right now. Mr Sarkozy has tried to inspire the French team with a spirit of "sacrifice for the glory of the nation". Maybe he, too, can be inspired by the essence of rugby and take a more collective approach to dealing with his European partners and his collaborators in government.

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