

Short? Moi? It's just another media tall story . . .

Size really does matter in French politics, says Damian Corless

'No one must be taller than the president.' That was the suggestion of a journalist to workers at a factory in Normandy who were selected to crowd around France's pint-sized prima donna, Nicolas Sarkozy, during a recent visit. "Yes. That's right," came the reply.

Before the president arrived at the car-parts factory, his aides arranged that he would be surrounded by shorter-than-your-average workers in order to enhance his standing. A Belgian TV crew spotted what was going on and asked some probing questions. The factory's trade union disclosed that one of the issues agreed in advance of the visit was that only short workers would be allowed to feature in photos of the president.

The Elysee Palace issued an indignant denial, claiming that insinuations the workers had been vetted for size were "totally far-fetched and grotesque", but no one was buying that. He's shown form before: in June, the 5ft 5in president was photographed standing on tippy toes while attending a D-Day ceremony in the company of the much taller Barack Obama and Gordon Brown. Sarkozy's taste for stacked heels has been contrasted with the post-nuptial preference of supermodel wife Carla Bruni for flat shoes.

According to the author Jean Pierre Friedman, who has written extensively about Sarkozy, the president "has a complex about his height that has given him a sense of inferiority, so he has to prove himself. Take a look at the way he walks. It's very peculiar. It almost seems as though he has lifts in his shoes that seem to disrupt his balance".

Sarkozy has been damned by critics who accuse him of suffering a "Napoleon complex" in regard to his height. The accusation is unfair to Napoleon Bonaparte, who was actually of average height for his day. It's thought that the self-made Emperor earned his reputation as a shorty because he surrounded himself with extra-lanky Imperial guards. But the slur has stuck, and Sarkozy has been variously labelled "Nicoleon" and "Bonaparte in a suit".

Ireland's own "Bonaparte in a suit" was Charles J Haughey, the subject of one biography cruelly entitled Short Fellow. There have been other short fellows who've scaled the heights in this country. Commenting on his lack of inches, Senator Fergal Quinn memorably said: "I was never particularly high." Referring to his RTE colleague, the late sports-caster and Olympic high-jumper, Gay Byrne once said: "I'd like to be as tall as Brendan O'Reilly."

Hollywood has given us no shortage of short fellows who stretched their talents all the way to the top. In the 1957 movie Boy On A Dolphin, Sophia Loren had to do her acting in a trench in order to appear smaller than her leading man, Alan Ladd, an individual who, by his own admission, had "the face of an ageing choirboy and the build of an undernourished featherweight". Ladd's lack of inches -- he detested his nickname "Tiny" at school -- didn't hamper his career. He went on to make The Deep Six, which required him to stand on orange boxes in order to appear taller than his fellow actors.

Although hardly a shorty at 5ft 8in, Humphrey Bogart would always try to stand one step higher than his leading ladies for photo opportunities. Also standing at 5ft 8in, Rod Stewart is currently dating the much taller Penny Lancaster (6ft 1in), who has been known to obligingly step down off the kerb in order to show off her partner in a more flattering light.

After divorcing pint-sized Tom Cruise in 2001, 5ft 11in Nicole Kidman famously quipped: "At least I can wear high heels now." Cruise subsequently married again above his height, and observers noticed that his wedding snaps gave the distinct impression that he was a good deal taller (he's not) than new wife Katie Holmes.

-

The notion that small men carry a chip on both shoulders may seem like an age-old cliché, but it has been borne out by a study published last year. Researchers found that men in the region of 5ft 4in were much more likely to harbour jealous feelings than those measuring 6ft and over. Prof Abraham Buunk of the University of Groningen said that women find tall men more physically

independent.ie/.../short-moi-its-just-...

attractive, they tend to earn higher wages and are more likely to have children.

Other studies convey more bad news for short men. One report states that the vertically challenged are more likely to be victims of bullying, leading to low self-esteem, which leads in turn to low achievement. And there's worse. Being short can have a detrimental effect on your success in business.

A survey by Fortune magazine of the 500 richest industrialists in the United States (nearly all men) found that most were three inches taller than the average person. A full 30pc of the most successful bosses were 6ft 2in or taller, compared with less than 4pc reaching that height in the general population. The same survey found that only 3pc of company bosses were under 5ft 7in in height.

A more recent survey found that an extra couple of inches can add an extra €800 to a man's annual salary. The research, conducted in America, Britain and Australia, found that a male standing at 6ft tall will on average earn 1.5pc more than a workmate who is a mere two inches shorter. Professor Andrew Leigh, who conducted the research, said: "The wage gain from another two inches of height is approximately equal to one extra year on the job. It seems a matter of status. Taller people command greater status, respect and wages."

-

Advanced
Search ▶