



My prison tips for Sarkozy: keep hush and let the sex jokes slide

The Tory ex-minister Jonathan Aitken was jailed for perjury in 1999 — whatever you do, he tells the former French president, don't sing London's Burning

Jonathan Aitken

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Nicolas Sarkozy is in solitary confinement “for his own protection” at La Santé Prison in Paris after his conviction over campaign financing.

But it is likely he will serve his sentence with other men at some point. These are my top ten tips for surviving the days ahead:

- 1.** Be aware that there is no worse oxymoron inside a jail than a “celebrity prisoner”. Your fellow inmates secretly, or not so secretly, despise tall poppies and long to take them down. So be *en garde* from day one.
- 2.** Sniff every *café noir* you are given to make sure that it's not laced with ill-wishers' urine or worse. If you get offers to “watch your back” say “*non, merci*” politely because this is probably the best way of avoiding being stabbed in the back. It is wise to assume, from the outset, that prison is a dangerous place until you have found your bearings and discovered who your friends and enemies are.
- 3.** Despite these dire warnings, you may build some strong and lasting friendships [during your sentence](#). I still cherish mine. Humour and the milk of human kindness are positive features of life on a prison wing. Listening to stories, enjoying jokes and helping to solve the problems of your cellmates all make life more bearable.

4. On the negative side the food will be uneatable in comparison with the menus of Michelin-starred restaurants or the Élysée Palace that you have been used to. But you will lose weight. I lost six kilos in my first month at HMP Belmarsh and have never really put them back on. This may be one reason why I am still fit enough to be working today at 83.



Nicolas Sarkozy can expect “more than a fair share of teasing” about his wife, Carla Bruni

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5. There will be a lot of chatter about assigning you a job, preferably one that is as humiliating as possible. Do not complain! Prison is so boring that anything that gets you out of your cell is a bonus. My job was to be the third assistant prison wing cleaner, aka the loo cleaner. On day one I was issued with a huge instruction manual which began: “Take Harpic in the right hand, brush in the left hand, scour the bowl six times in clockwise direction then repeat six times in the anti-clockwise direction.” The officer who read out these instructions (Joe Rook, still serving in HMPPS) collapsed into laughter and became a friend. He used to award me a weekly bonus of £1.10 saying: “You have the cleanest bogs in the gaff again, Aitken!” You won’t go wrong, Monsieur ex-President, if you go with the same flow in les latrines.

6. Don’t start having ideas about how you could reform the prison system. Everyone will agree with you, but no one will do anything about it. Instead concentrate on identifying some small service you might do for prisoners around you. I found a niche in reading and writing letters for illiterate prisoners. After my availability as an amanuensis became known, a queue would form outside my cell every night requesting letters on the most intimate subjects imaginable. After some months, one old lag joked: “Hey Jonno, do

you realise that all this letter-writing business of yours is having a fantastic impact on the girls of Brixton. They can't believe the sudden improvement in the love letters they are getting from this nick!"

7. Girls feature colourfully in the conversation of prisoners, so I must warn you to expect more than a fair share of teasing about your beautiful wife, Carla Bruni. I was the father of three glamorous teenage daughters in the 1990s so I had to put up with, at worst, some vile obscenities, and at best many "phwoarr!" comments every time their photos appeared in the papers. (Two of my girls were models.) You are old enough to pretend to be deaf, when the "ooh la las" come your way. Be dignified but don't stand on your dignity. The older men in your jail will probably stop the younger men's "compliments" about Carla getting out of hand. And when your wife visits, tell her to dress not just demurely but as if she were a burqa-wearing grandmother at a Saudi mosque.

8. You may be surprised to discover that the officers are your friends, not your enemies. They will be heavily invested in making sure you are safe and that you come to no harm. The long-serving professionals in both French and British prison services tend to be wise and experienced old birds who know how to avoid trouble on their wings. Respect them, quietly confide in them and they will be your allies in helping you get through your sentence.

9. On a flippant musical note, don't start singing on the wings. One of the big mistakes I made one night in HMP Standford Hill was to take a guitar in my hand. After a calypso or two I led the wing on a round of *London's Burning*. The officers thought a riot was under way when I led a hundred lusty voices in the chorus "Fire, fire! Fire, fire! ... Fetch the engines!"

10. You may think I am entering the theatre of the absurd here, yet prison life is not unlike theatrical life. A drama happens every day. But no one is in charge of the script, be it a comedy or tragedy. The best part you can play is a low-profile one. Because all men are equal in a prison uniform, your acceptance will depend on how well you fade anonymously into the background. "Do yer bird quietly," a Belmarshian once said to me — it is good advice.

Even in a light-hearted column I do not underestimate the pain and the sadness of your imprisonment. I know about falling from grace from many angles.



Aitken was freed in 2000 after seven months in prison

DYLAN MARTINEZ/REUTERS

These days I am a prison chaplain, a sort of Monsieur le Curé, to 1,200 men in HMP Pentonville. Those of my flock who do best here are those who accept their guilt, forget any importance they may once have had and just get on with the weird, yet not unbearable, wonderland of Planet Prison.

If you can do that you will be able to echo the famous words of Abbé Sieyès. When asked what he did in the Revolution he replied: “*J’ai vécu*” — I survived.