

# Unlike Clinton, McCain told them the truth

**Irwin Stelzer**, who urged the US presidential contender not to come to the Tory conference, still admired his honest speech and its refreshing contrast with Clinton's at Manchester

Two very different Americans abroad, two very different messages. Bill Clinton came to sunny Manchester to share his celebrity with New Labour, and John McCain came to rain-soaked Bournemouth to share some ideas with the Tories. The former president came to tell the delegates how wonderful they are. You, he told them, are 'change agents', by which he did not mean people who convert fivers into coins. You must engage in 'home improvement', by which he did not mean become DIYers, but leaders in the fight for better education and such, so as to equip yourselves to continue leading the international battle against poverty, climate change, Aids and social injustice. Clinton loved them, and told them so, and they returned his love in such plentitude that, were his desire for adoration not insatiable, he would have left more than satisfied. One delegate described experiencing his address as the equivalent of being bathed in a warm tub of fudge.

The talk had the former president and now-aspiring first gentleman's usual signature bits. Warmth, riveting eye contact with the audience, and economy with the truth. America, he said, is in sad shape. Workers' wages are stagnant (in fact, labour income is up 8.3 per cent year-on-year) and college graduates are scrambling for jobs as more and more high-skilled work is outsourced (the unemployment rate among college graduates is actually an infinitesimal 1.8 per cent). No matter: all the delegates cheered when Clinton assured them that they are on the right side of the issues of the day, and called (to no avail, as it turned out) for unity lest the other lot take over, and wipe out Labour's gains, as George W. Bush has wiped out the budget surplus that he, Clinton, had bequeathed to America. That surplus, 'real money', could have been used to eradicate world poverty and disease, as Clinton's new NGO now is attempting to do.

Tony Blair, who likens Clinton to a rock star, thinks the man he had difficulty persuading to help the Europeans end genocide in the Balkans is the age's most talented politician — 'To watch him work a room is a master-class in politics' is a reasonable paraphrase of the Prime Minister's private appraisal.

David Cameron could have used some of the Clinton praise of 'change agents' to

soothe the restless delegates at his party's get-together. Perhaps the delegates were annoyed at having to queue in the rain because the Tory party bureaucracy — the very one that promises more efficient government — could not get their credentials in the post on time. More likely, Cameron's refusal to support the majority of his party's demand for tax cuts, and his insistence on imposing on local associations candidates selected on the basis of gender and/or colour, were changes too far. No matter: the Tories scent power, and will forgive many things to get their hands on those red boxes, ministerial cars and the levers of power.

Until that great day, the Tories had to make do with Senator John McCain, currently in the lead for the Republican party's presidential nomination. Some, this writer included, had urged McCain to cancel his visit after Cameron used the anniversary of the slaughter of the innocents on 11 September to tell his party he planned to distance it from America. He also favours a Middle East policy that is more 'even-handed', code for less favourable to Israel and more favourable to the Palestinians — no surprise coming from the member representing Douglas Hurd's old constituency and world view. These views are anathema to McCain, who anyway owes Tony Blair more than a little loyalty for supporting the Senator's position on Iraq, and who therefore might have thought twice before lending an aura of international credibility to the Cameron camp.

But come to Bournemouth the Senator did, apparently at the request of George Osborne, the Tories' representative to America's conservatives now that Cameron has made it clear that he is no neo- or any other brand of conservative. The audience was treated to an old film of the Senator's career. What the film did not mention was

that McCain could have avoided over five years of the most horrendous torture. Because his father was a four-star admiral who had been appointed commander of all US forces in the Pacific shortly after his son was shot down, the North Vietnamese saw a propaganda opportunity and offered to release McCain. But the military code is 'first in, first out', and the then-lieutenant commander refused to be released until all those captured before him were let out. His captors refused, and McCain suffered torture that to this day leaves him unable to raise his arms high enough to comb his hair.

The contrast between the Clinton and McCain performances came as no surprise to anyone familiar with the two men. For one thing, Clinton is well known to his audience, which he has addressed before, and was relaxed among old friends. McCain was on less familiar ground. As one long-time observer of these political rituals told me, 'Most of the delegates had never heard of McCain, and were wondering why he had been invited.' The answer: David Cameron is eager to demonstrate that his, er, vagueness about his policies has not deterred successful centre-right politicians, including McCain, Sweden's new prime minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, and France's Nicolas Sarkozy, from accepting him in their club.

For another, Clinton knew his audience as well as they knew him. He could and did refer knowledgeably to local issues and politics, even quoting from that morning's *Guardian*. All thanks to Alastair Campbell. McCain, by contrast, spent an inordinate amount of time recalling the virtues of Ronald Reagan, relevant in a hunt for votes in the Republican presidential primaries, but of no interest to his Tory audience. I had no answer when one political pro asked me, 'Why did he do that?'

But enough quibbles. When it comes to what is important, the possible future president trumped the former White House occupant. Clinton talked about winning elections, about the need to keep the bad guys out of office, about his current laudable if very publicly self-aggrandising charitable activities — the stuff of a politician's life. McCain talked about the need to be honest with the voters in order to earn their respect. He spoke of 'honesty, courage and faith in our principles . . . the dignity of Man'; about 'the people in the world who hate us . . . and . . . wish to hurt us as much as they can. . . . We will never surrender. They will.' I am told that many in the audience have served in the armed forces or have relatives who do. Patriotism and steadfastness are virtues they admire.

Like Bill Clinton, John McCain got a standing ovation. Unlike Clinton, he got it not for telling an audience what they wanted to hear, but what he felt they should hear.

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