

# Politics, but not as we know it

Members return to Westminster this week after the party conference season. But earlier in the autumn, MPs from all parties crossed the Atlantic to witness the pre-election conventions of the Democrats and then the Republicans. How do these rallies differ from their British counterparts, and what can our parties learn from them? **Jeremy Browne** and **Tobias Ellwood** report



*Jeremy Browne is Liberal Democrat MP for Taunton*

If Barack Obama becomes the next President of the United States – as I expect – people will ask, in years to come: “Where were you when he accepted the Democratic nomination in front of 84,000 people in Denver?” And I will say: “I was there.”

It was a remarkable occasion. American conventions are shows rather than conferences. They contain speeches of political significance, but without the procedural worthiness of our British equivalents. The audience demands to be entertained.

So the event runs from 3pm until 9pm. The schedule is like a rock festival, with the obscure acts padding out the early hours, and the headline performers saved until the climax.

Unlike a more deferential British political audience, the delegates make no real attempt to pretend to be interested in speeches which do not seize their attention. The early stages of the show are filled with background noise, as the audience arrives to reserve a good seat, catch up on the gossip from the previous evening, and go in search of food. Obscure congressmen try to talk over the hubbub; manfully echoing the mantras of the convention.



Barack Obama prepares to make his acceptance speech in Denver



*Tobias Ellwood is Conservative MP for Bournemouth East*

For the small British contingent of MPs invited to observe the Republican Party Convention in Minneapolis, this was an eye opening, educational and impressive spectacle.

Though difficult to say what elements could be incorporated into our own party conferences, the sheer scale of US conventions is mind boggling, from the conference hall itself (as big as Fulham football ground) to the size of the political donations. Even the cookies at the fringe meetings were as large as dinner plates! We learnt about new IT campaigning systems, new personalities, new words such as ‘hockey mom’ and new food such as the ‘moose burger’.

We did not learn much about policy but that is not what US conventions are for. They are about the nomination of candidates, outlining the campaign strategy, sharing a drink or two before the final push and taking a pop at the opposition. This year, both party conventions had additional obligations: for the Democrats, helping Hillary Clinton come to terms with not gaining the vice presidential nomination slot and, for the Republicans, helping Sarah Palin who did.

By most measures, the Democrats should be ahead in the polls. The economy is faltering, the (Republican) President is unpopular and the Republican Party is tipped to lose seats in both the Senate and the House. Yet somehow this election is not in the bag. The Grand Old Party is very much still part of a race which has become too close to call since the Alaskan Governor Palin was catapulted into the fray. It may be too early to say if Palin’s widely praised speech was the pivotal moment that is eventually attributed as the turning point for a successful campaign. Her speech was, from an American perspective, impressive and effective. It helped to forge unity within a party that has hitherto been deeply divided, it energised the Republicans into truly believing they can win, and it forced the Democrats to urgently review their tactics as they could no longer claim the McCain-Palin ticket was simply ‘four more years of Bush’.

With Sarah Palin on board the Republican campaign suddenly looks fresh, exciting and distinctly ‘anti-establishment’ in its outlook. More than 37 million Americans tuned in to the so-called ‘hockey mom’ speech (13 million more than for Joe Biden,

Barack Obama is the Elvis Presley of the convention. The sun will set over the stadium before he makes his appearance. Meanwhile, the show builds and builds.

Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico, an early contender for the nomination himself, makes a decent speech. Sheryl Crow performs with her band. The sun gets lower in the sky.

Then, one of the major political stars: Al Gore. He makes a typically workmanlike speech, combining an environmental call-to-arms with some well-grooved self-deprecating observations about close elections. Next up: Stevie Wonder. The sun is behind the stadium now, and we are all in shade, but the sky is still blue.

The atmosphere is then lowered to simmer level, all the better for bringing it aggressively back to the boil for the climax. Ordinary Americans, all from swing states, recount their misfortunes under George Bush, and show confidence in the prospect of a brighter future.

It is almost dark now: dark enough for the biographical film on the big screens. And then, Barack Obama arrives on stage. I will never experience an atmosphere quite like it. The closest equivalent is a moment of real sporting drama.

The speech never reaches his greatest rhetorical heights. The target audience instead is the economically nervous skilled workers in Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania. The content is strong and clear, although remarkably protectionist for a British audience used to the consensus view that globalisation has no opt-out. He is a once-in-a-generation politician: a man with the ability to change America's relationship with the world. The delivery is, as always, crisp and authoritative, with the emphasis of the words beautifully weighted.

The show ends with Barack and Michelle Obama, vice presidential candidate Joe and Jill Biden, fireworks, and a sea of banners proclaiming the main message: 'Change.'

The earlier parts of the convention were held indoors in a massive arena normally used for basketball. Outside, thousands of street-sellers peddle Obama memorabilia. Downtown Denver has a carnival atmosphere. Every speaker proclaims himself or herself to be the embodiment of the American Dream. They have overcome adversity, hauled themselves up to a position of prominence through hard work, and they wish every American to have the same opportunities.

The band is fantastic. Maybe fifteen-strong, it warms up the audience, and fills any awkward silences. Sometimes, for no obvious reason, there is a musical interlude, and the delegates dance away the delay before the next speech. It's politics, but not as we know it.

Monday is given over to an emotional Ted Kennedy and a polished Michelle Obama. Tuesday is Hillary Clinton's night. She says all she needs to say.

By Wednesday, the line-up is stellar. Bill Clinton gives the best speech I have ever seen. He is a great communicator, of course, making an animalistic connection with his audience. But he is much more than merely a great communicator. The speech works on every level, and perfectly frames the coming contest in terms most advantageous to his party.

Then, John Kerry, an impressive politician who would have been a better president than he was a candidate. Finally Joe Biden – the man tasked with sealing the deal with the blue-collar base. Obama appears on stage. The two men stand before a delirious audience. Yes, we can! Yes, we can! Yes, we can! ■

the Democratic vice presidential candidate). These are impressive numbers, and with Hillary Clinton forced into the political sidelines there is a vacancy on the national scene for another charismatic female to shine. Comparisons with Margaret Thatcher's entry into front line politics have already been made. Thatcher was, however, a moderate by comparison. Palin's Achilles Heel may well be her extreme right wing credentials. While her strong views

have helped unite a party which is still cautious about McCain's maverick credentials, they may be less appealing to independent voters whose support will be needed.

With the conventions now over and the teams in place, we approach a more meaningful period of the presidential election where policy is announced (and scrutinised) as the two cam-



Tobias Ellwood in the Minneapolis convention centre

paigns try to appeal to real voters rather than just party members. This detail is well overdue. Neither party has, for example, spelled out its plans for reviving the economy, bringing spending under control or what they would do differently to President Bush to fight terrorism. As in 2004, only a handful of states will decide the outcome, with Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina and Indiana being some states to watch out for. This all makes for a fascinating election which is being followed more closely than ever before and which is likely to lead to a record turn-out. Good for democracy, of course, but I can't help wondering whether, if Barack Obama had swallowed his pride and made Hillary his vice presidential nominee, it could perhaps have been in the bag for the Democrats. ■

**Both MPs went to the conventions with support from the British-American Parliamentary Group**