

Watching the American political conventions: impressions of the uninitiated

A view from "down under"

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To an overseas visitor, the overwhelming impression one takes from the Republican and Democratic conventions is that of garish extravaganzas designed to avoid any discussion of substantive issues. The spectre looming over the events was Clinton's impeachment—but both parties alluded to this traumatic episode only in the most veiled manner.

The themes that appeared to dominate were “family” and “faith”—and these had to be presented *tangibly* to the audience. Candidates not only paraded their wives and children like trophies, but the wives and children were obliged to make their own speeches.

That this was the common currency of *political* meetings seemed astonishing. This phenomenon compares very markedly with Australian elections, where political spouses rarely make speeches, and barely emerge in the media coverage of campaigns. As for the children, they are never more than a vague blur in the background.

In Australia, voting is compulsory. Nevertheless, public disenchantment with the bourgeois political setup is growing, leading governments to announce extremely short election campaigns—a month has become the norm. High profile sports figures and media personalities, with no history of political involvement, are increasingly co-opted by the establishment parties to stand as candidates.

Still, the debasement of politics has proceeded even further in the US. One could be forgiven, turning on the TV, for mistaking the recent goings on in Philadelphia and Los Angeles for big Hollywood parties, into which a few politicians had strayed. Political issues were not the order of the day.

All the leading speakers at both conventions made

references to the loving and highly moral state of their family relations, imposing their personal histories, laid out in copious detail, on the public. It was obligatory to establish a family pedigree, going back at least several generations.

For example, George W. Bush's running mate, Richard Cheney, a man with the demeanor of a brute, was introduced with folksy tales from his wife illustrating his love for his grandparents. In his own speech Cheney made the absurd claim, apparently to establish his credentials as a Washington “outsider,” that when he left public office at the end of the senior Bush's administration, he simply “loaded up a U-haul” and drove back to Wyoming “to retire, go fishing and look after the grandchildren.” How he made the transition from rugged retirement to a multi-million-dollar post as head of the oil industry giant, Halliburton Inc., he did not say.

The Republicans had no monopoly on grotesque family reminiscences. Hillary Clinton recited a tale about the hardship of her mother's early years, illustrating how truly fashionable it has become in the political arena to have a forebear who suffered in the Depression. Al Gore's family reminiscences seemed an attempt to trump the First Lady—his mum suffered even more.

What is the meaning of this flaunting of personal relations for political gain? It seems to be an extended euphemism employing all sorts of nuances that remain obscure to an outside observer. In what other country would one find pages of media commentary devoted to “The Kiss” that Gore bestowed on his wife prior to his speech?

For Gore and the Democrats, the coded message

appears to be an attempt to distance themselves from Clinton and prove their morality. Gore seemed to be intimating that 30 years of marriage and his close relationship to his four children, which his daughter specified in detail, guaranteed that he would commit no indiscretion a la Clinton.

For the Republicans, on the other hand, the coded message was to remind one and all of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, without appearing to do so. When Laura Bush took to the podium, obviously an inexperienced speaker, she produced a stream of family anecdotes, and then slipped in a not-so-veiled attack on Clinton.

Then there is the question of religious faith. The conventions themselves had somewhat the aura of revival meetings. Affirmations of belief popped up in all the candidates' speeches. Lieberman was unrestrained in this respect, but Gore outdid him in providing a demonstration of religious conviction. As the Democratic convention concluded, a revivalist preacher conducted a benediction. While the minister seized the opportunity to work systematically through the Old Testament, Gore had the look of a man transported to a better place.

In the main, religion plays a very minor role in Australian electioneering. There is no way that a public political meeting would be handed over to a revivalist, that he would be given carte blanche to pray interminably, and that a candidate would stand deep in prayer for minutes on end—all of this being televised to a national audience. The spectacle was bizarre

Perhaps there is a connection to TV talk shows. A television documentary about the conventions during the post-war period asserted that they had been sanitised to meet the demands of the media. In fact, the degeneration of the media has proceeded apace with the decay of electoral politics in America.

Media commentary on both conventions was virtually devoid of substance. It was, at best, as though a football match were being discussed. It illuminated nothing about political issues. Commentators dismissed as “class warfare” and “old hat” the elements of Gore's speech—demagogic though they were—that alluded to social questions facing the electorate. The real question, they insisted, was whether Gore had established himself as his “own man.” The same commentators had accepted as good political coin Bush's “compassionate

conservatism.”

It seems that many people had no desire to watch the TV coverage of these conventions. But to the uninitiated, it had a horrible fascination. That these meetings can be paraded as political discussion at the highest level says a great deal about the state of bourgeois politics.



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