

Officials cry poor as they dig deep for log cabins

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One of the surprising things about the United States, given its enormous wealth, is how completely its political leadership is dominated by poor people.

This is the only obvious conclusion to draw from the proceedings of the Democratic National Convention in Denver last week.

Most of the elected officials addressing the convention reminded the delegates - and the viewers - of their humble roots. Just as the Republican Abraham Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin, most Democrats in Denver had their own log-cabin story.

It seems that all members of Congress either come from immigrant families or worked at night to put themselves through school. A typical example is Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri. In her convention speech, McCaskill told a moving tale of an unnamed woman of modest means from a small town who had battled the odds and worked as a waitress before going into public service. It was only when she uttered the words "she now works for families of modest means as a United States senator" that it became clear she was talking about herself.

Before last week, most people knew Joe Biden as a windy six-term senator with expertise in foreign relations, good taste in suits and an impressive coiffure. Now we know him as a scrappy Irish-American fighter born in Scranton, Pennsylvania - the unglamorous setting for the American version of *The Office*. Biden's daily train ride from his home in Wilmington, Delaware to Washington DC has become the most famous commute in history.

Often the log cabin in question is several generations removed from the speaker. In her speech to the convention, Senator Amy Klobuchar recounted that her "grandpa worked 1500 feet underground in the iron ore mines of Ely, Minnesota". Governor Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas (whose father was a congressman and the governor of Ohio) somehow worked in the fact that her great-grandmother was a maid.

All this rang pretty false. In the first place, the environment undercut the message. American political conventions are like a cross between a revival meeting and an airport lounge: there's a lot of passion on the convention floor, but the corridors are full of type-A personalities yelling into their mobile phones and hustling for a better class of credential. (Who wants to be a mere special guest when they might be an honoured guest?) In Denver, the politicians spoke about meat and potatoes, but a lot of the listeners were eating shrimp.

Second, the faux personal stories of the powerful men and women at the podium were overshadowed by the real personal stories of a few powerless men and women who also appeared on stage. In a creditable decision, the convention organisers invited a number of working people to speak: a car worker from Michigan who has just been diagnosed with diabetes and is scheduled to lose his job, a former textiles employee who has been laid off, and so on.

This may sound mawkish and manipulative, but did not come across that way. The speakers' lack of polish was a relief. It was good to hear from ordinary people, rather than hearing about them the whole time. These individuals truly live in the 21st century equivalents of a log cabin.

The final reason it was hard to take the Pythonesque tales of growing up in a shoebox seriously was that there were genuine examples of social mobility present: Barack and Michelle Obama.

These two black Americans - one of whom grew up without his father, the other whose father was a pump operator before being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis - are favoured to win the White House in November. Republicans portray the Obamas as rocket-chomping elitists but, until a few years ago, they were still paying off their student loans. Barack Obama was unable to get a floor pass to the 2000 Democratic convention; last week his campaign moved the convention to a football field to accommodate the 80,000 people who wanted to hear him speak.

This is a remarkable story, and it must be tempting for other politicians to try to match it.

It is hard not to feel optimistic about the United States the week that an African-American is nominated for president. That event may even be enough to dislodge some unfounded international prejudices against the country. Unfortunately, it may also confirm the tendency of American politicians to excavate a log cabin from their history - or to write one in.

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