

Opinion & Analysis

Obama is only credible candidate on climate change



JOHN GIBBONS

To his credit, Obama has resisted the idiocy of promising petrol tax cuts... unlike McCain and Clinton

YOU CAN always count on the Americans to do the right thing, Winston Churchill once observed, "after they have exhausted all the alternatives".

There has never been a more critical moment in the battle to stave off climate-driven global chaos. Much time has already been lost. The eight-year Bush administration was for the environment the worst possible presidency, at the worst possible time. Who remembers George Bush's election pledge to put limits on CO₂ emissions? That lasted for 53 days of his first term.

But now, surely things can only get better? The Republican candidate John McCain certainly talks a good fight on climate. McCain has, in his own words "been a leader on the issue of global warming, with the courage to call the nation to action on an issue we can no longer afford to ignore".

Democratic contenders Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both chime in well with the tone set in recent years by former vice-president Al Gore, which positions the Democrats as the real guardians of the environment against those rapacious Republicans. And political leadership, Gore reminds us, "is a renewable resource".

These pronouncements are all fine and dandy on paper, but how do the credentials of the presidential candidates weather the maelstrom of US electoral politics?

McCain's self-professed courage in calling the nation to action appears to have deserted him in the face of some irate motorists.

His response was to float a proposal to introduce a temporary cut in federal excise tax on petrol for what is known as the "summer travel season". The idea is so daft, even the White House hasn't gone for it.

This summer tax break translates to cheaper petrol with which to drive to the beach. While this may be environmental insanity, especially as peak oil approaches, it plays well in US politics. Clinton is, of course, made of sterner stuff. "Today, global warming and dependence on foreign oil are two of the biggest challenges of our time," she states in an impressively dense 15-page *Energy Plan*.

While petrol has more than doubled in price in the last seven years, the US remains far and away the largest energy and resource hog. Although accounting for less than 3 per cent of the world's population, it consumes almost a quarter of all oil, burning it at the rate of 21 million barrels a day.

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Fully 70 per cent of the US's oil usage is for transportation. Nothing better illustrates the sheer profligacy of this orgy of consumption than its love affair with gas-guzzling SUVs.

Clinton's energy plan promises to cut oil dependence by "setting tough new fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks" and beefing up biofuel production. Thirty years ago, Americans reacted to the oil shocks of the 1970s by turning away from domestically produced guzzlers and buying efficient

Japanese cars in their millions. As petrol fell in price in the 1980s and 1990s, engine sizes crept up and up, and fuel efficiency declined. Hillary's husband, former president Bill, pandered to the loss-making Detroit manufacturers by introducing tax breaks for what were classed as "light trucks".

Soon, these behemoths were everywhere, as drivers came to quickly love the elevated seating position and sheer bulk that psychologists tell us confers pleasant feelings of invincibility over lesser road users.

So Hillary's well-oiled political machine has learned from her husband's error, and is finally ready to take on the lobbyists while weaning the American public away from its terminally wasteful ways? Not quite.

Instead, she promptly backed McCain's call to scrap federal excise taxes on petrol, pitching herself as defender of the working man. As her recent TV ad put it: "People are hurting. It's time for a president who's ready to take action, now." Or, as Groucho Marx put it: "I've got principles, and if you don't like them – I've got other principles."

To his credit, Obama has resisted the Clinton/McCain axis of idiocy on the petrol tax cut. What Obama appears to want to say is

that it's a barking mad idea that will come back to bite us. But he has restricted himself to pouring scorn on its sheer impracticality.

Whoever takes up residence in 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue next January will face monumental challenges, with the climate and sustainability crisis chief among them. At the conclusion of the Earth Summit in 1992, George Bush snr put it bluntly: "The American way of life is not negotiable."

Hillary Clinton's message, when parsed, remains the same. Obama describes climate change as "one of the greatest moral challenges of our generation. I went to Detroit, I stood in front of a group of automakers, and I told them that when I am president, there will be no more excuses – they will have to make cars that use less oil."

Nobody can say what kind of president Obama might become. Change carries risk, but it's hardly more perilous than the steady-as-she-sinks formula on offer from the McCain/Clinton ticket. It seems self-evident that you can't solve a problem with the kind of thinking – or politics – that created it.

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