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WHITE HOUSE FAVOURITE TAPS INTO HUNGER FOR CHANGE

BY FRANK LUNTZ
US POLITICAL COMMENTATOR



EUROPE has spoken. Having watched the American presidential contest from a distance, but not from afar, a survey of several countries, including Britain, has Democrat Barack Obama the clear favourite over Republican John McCain.

Apparently they buy Obama's argument that change—any change—is better than four more years of Republican rule, or, as Obama says, a third Bush term.

Watching both candidates, it's not hard to see why.

When McCain speaks, it's like nails across a rhetorical chalk board.

From his awkward tenor to his perplexing grin, his speaking style is reminiscent of an ageing professor well past his sell-by date but still trying



desperately to prove his relevance.

His constant use of the refrain “my friends” sounds more like a 1950s politician than an early 21st century political visionary.

And frankly, Stevie Wonder or David Blunkett could read an autocue better.

Contrast that with Barack Obama, the super-slick, super-cool political rock star of his generation.

Speaking passionately and effortlessly to crowds that would fill British football stadiums—and are just as loud—it's hard not to get caught up in Obamamania.

Verbally, his language is solidly of today, even as he talks of a better tomorrow.

Symbolically, Obama's always surrounded by hordes of well-scrubbed youths with adulation in their eyes and “Yes we can” on their television camera-ready signs.

Why Obama will rock the world

He's got all the right moves.

Even the fist-pump exchange between him and his wife just seconds before he declared victory was a signal to the millions of people watching at home that he gets it.

Damn, he's good.

His image is so fresh and invigorating that he is likely to increase his public support over the coming days *despite* the endorsement of Hillary Clinton rather than because of it—much as in Britain, Gordon Brown's initial popularity was due more to the fact that he simply wasn't Tony Blair.

But even with such a visually striking disparity between the two US candidates, Obama and McCain are still in a dead heat in most national surveys. The politics of yesterday versus today are evenly matched in the pitched battle for tomorrow.

In the five months between today and election day, McCain's challenge is not to be the most popular guy on the stage, but rather the most presidential.

While this is all new to Americans, you have been living the same generational contrast for over a year now.

In fact, the parallels are eerily similar. In David Cameron you have an Opposition leader clearly in touch with the next generation and a man of unquestioned verbal dexterity, but no distinguishable record whatsoever.

Thrive

Contrast that with Brown, who has more than two decades of distinguished parliamentary service and yet reminds voters of an uninspiring civil servant in whose mouth the English language goes to wither and die.

Like McCain, Gordon Brown has to hope that governing experience and gravitas can overwhelm a better message and messenger.

McCain and Brown don't just look and sound like the status quo—they are the embodiment of it. But while it is said that you can't teach an old

dog new tricks, if history is any lesson, older candidates can survive and even thrive against younger opponents.

Americans still remember the verbal smack-down Ronald Reagan casually laid on his youthful and unsuspecting opponent Walter Mondale in 1984: "I want you to know that I will not make age an issue of this campaign... (*pause for effect*). I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience . . ." *Pause for audience approval. Then flash a confident grin.*

McCain's message requires a similar generational contrast—to say, without actually saying it: "I was defending my country honourably as a prisoner of war in a Vietnamese POW camp while you were eating ice cream and learning to surf in Hawaii."

McCain did indeed reach the rhetorical sweet spot once last autumn in a deliberate jab against Hillary Clinton.

"A few days ago, Senator Clinton tried to spend \$1million on a Woodstock concert museum.

"Now my friends, I wasn't there. I'm sure it was a cultural and pharmaceutical event. I was tied up at the time."

That one line brought the audience to its feet, changed the dynamic of that debate for the viewers at home, and re-invigorated McCain's campaign.

The line itself will go down as a campaign classic. It allowed him to beat the 'experience' drum without—as Hillary did—beating it to death.

Brown had a similar re-defining opportunity, but he completely bottled it.

His first hundred days were highly eventful—terrorism, floods and a foot-and-mouth outbreak—and highly successful.

As a result, British voters were ready to give him and Labour five more years to correct the mistakes of the Blair government and set Labour right again.

Spanking

But in refusing to go to the electorate, he committed the cardinal error of incumbency: failing to demonstrate the courage of his convictions.

By blinking in the face of an uncertain outcome on polling day, he has almost guaranteed an electoral spanking when that day does finally come.

As for Obama and Cameron, they will both learn that a fresh face and a hopeful voice is good to have in our television age.

However, how often do people walk into a job interview counting on their lack of experience to land them the position?

Being president or prime minister is no place for on-the-job training—but in the desire to boot out the current leader, it is also no place for professional politicians. How ironic then that the candidate who says "there are some things more important than winning an election" is the most likely to be elected.

When President Bush spoke at Yale University last month, he reassured those students with poor grades that they too could one day become President.

The kids laughed, but their parents did not find it funny, and neither do most Americans or Europeans. People everywhere are tired of a President with mangled sentence structure who believes in barnstorming the world in the name of democracy.

We would much prefer an unseasoned, untested president with words of passion and inspiration barnstorming the world in the name of diplomacy.

Yes, Europe has spoken.

About five months from now, America is likely to echo your sentiment—and so will Britain some day soon.

■ **Frank Luntz is America's top pollster, an international communication advisor and author of *Words That Work: It's Not What you Say, It's What People Hear.***