

## Pitching a safe pair of hands

July 30, 2016

Hillary Clinton hit the nail on the head in her acceptance speech to the Democratic National Convention when she said no one wanted to see a continuation of the status quo in the US. But she has a long way to go before the November 8 election if she is to persuade voters that she can achieve the change that is needed and that her presidency, if she wins, will not be just a continuation of the past eight years of Barack Obama.

Few White House candidates, as Mr Obama told the convention, are as well qualified as Mrs Clinton after eight years as a leading US senator and four as secretary of state, a role in which she was involved in decisions such as the killing of Osama bin Laden. Yet, as she acknowledged, “I get it that some people (still) don’t know what to make of me.”

From voters’ perspectives, she and Republican candidate Donald Trump are the least popular and trusted contenders for the presidency in decades. Mr Trump has split his party, with former president George W. Bush speculating he could be the “last Republican president”. He, his father George HW Bush and the party’s previous two presidential nominees, Mitt Romney and John McCain, boycotted the Republican convention.

In contrast, Mrs Clinton capitalised on the Democratic Party’s relative unity. The price of doing so, however, was that much of her speech was an electoral sop to the power exerted within the Democrats by socialist senator Bernie Sanders. Mrs Clinton’s promises included free college education, relief for those paying down university debt and industry protectionism. This and much else, she claimed, would be funded by Wall Street and big corporations, which “are going to start paying their fair share” in taxes. Her approach confirmed what Dan Ikenson, director of the Cato Institute think tank, described in *The Wall Street Journal* as her inclination to “say or do anything to get elected, even if it means ‘evolving’ from pro-trade first lady to anti-trade presidential candidate to pro-trade secretary of state to anti-trade candidate back to allegedly pro-trade president”. As expected at such conventions, Mrs Clinton’s speech was strong, filled with glowing assurances about America’s “greatness” and future prospects. While she showed no sign of the alarming isolationism that has marked Mr Trump’s campaign, Mrs Clinton, like her opponent, has flip-flopped on the issue of trade, pledging she would “say no to unfair trade deals”. After helping negotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership as secretary of state she is now against it — under pressure from Senator Sanders and to counter Mr Trump’s opposition to the deal, which is vital for Australia’s prosperity and that of our Asia-Pacific region.

At least, unlike Mr Trump, Mrs Clinton supports the so-called US defence pivot to the strategically important Southeast Asian region that, as secretary of state, she played a significant role in establishing. In an encouraging contrast to Mr Trump, Mrs Clinton strongly pledged herself to working with NATO and other US allies. As secretary of state, she was always regarded as more hawkish than Mr Obama towards fighting Islamic terrorism. With Islamist terror set to be the dominant foreign policy issues of the next few years, it was a bad sign of the Democrats' outlook that on the first day of their convention, on Tuesday Australian time, Islamic State or terrorism were not mentioned in one of 61 speeches. After Mr Obama's vacillation on major issues and his failure to keep US forces in Iraq for long enough, which fostered Islamic State, Mrs Clinton must be more detailed and emphatic in her pledge to strike Islamic State from the air and support those fighting it on the ground.

Mrs Clinton will hope that her powerful, competent speech will give her a similar boost to that Mr Trump received a week ago after his acceptance speech, which added to his strong lead among non-college-educated white Americans. In a hard race, Mrs Clinton, despite the email scandal that has undermined voters' trust, will pitch herself as a safer pair of hands than Mr Trump, with his ill discipline and unpredictability.