

# It's convention

Down  
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## season

By Gary Younge

THE fog rolls in so quickly off the Atlantic that it can smother the town of Lubec, in the state of Maine, in seconds. One moment brilliant sunshine glistens off the shore; the next you can barely see to the end of the road.

But directions to the easternmost town in the US are simple — head north on route 189 and if you hit the ocean or Canada, you've gone too far. In this close-knit community (population 1,652) everybody fits in to one of three categories: locals, whose families have often been here for generations; "summer people" with holiday homes; and those "from away", meaning from anywhere else.

In his stump speech, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, John Edwards, says there are two Americas: "One America — middle-class America whose needs Washington has long forgotten; another America — narrow-interest America whose every wish is Washington's command." Lubec's locals do not fit into either.

Living in Washington County, one of the poorest in the US, they are certainly doing the work, but they are not middle class. Take Daniel Fitzsimmons. He used to employ around 50 people in a business making Christmas wreaths. When the North American Free Trade Agreement came in he went out of business, undercut by cheaper wreaths from Canada. "It's free trade to some people, but it ain't free to us because we're losing everything we had," he says.

Fitzsimmons, 41, turned to digging for clams, scallops and urchins until he found himself

area which has lost what little industry it had, it owes its precarious economic viability to seasonal work.

In a year, like this one, when a mild winter cuts the blueberry crop in half, those who have been teetering on the edge fall far and fast without a net to catch them. If your car packs up, your child gets sick or the weather is bad, you could find you are suddenly in serious trouble.

But on a national level the issues facing those who live here are by no means marginal. One in eight Americans lives below the poverty line and one in 10 has no health insurance. Add to that the one in eight black men in their 20s in prison, and you have a nation where being impoverished, incarcerated or in need of medical coverage is a mainstream way of life to which mainstream politics has no adequate response.

That is not to say that it makes no difference to people here who wins. The economy is not the only issue they care about — there is abortion, gun control, gay marriage and the war, to name just a few. And things could get worse. And what they think could be crucial. Maine is a swing state. Al Gore took it last time, but the latest poll puts Kerry only narrowly ahead of Bush. In 2000, turnout in Lubec was more than 60% and in Cherryfield it was around 70% — way above the national average. Lubec went to Gore, Cherryfield to Bush.

Those who need change most expect it least — few here think the result will make much difference to them. On the banks of Lake Tunk, outside Cherryfield, a picnic turns to politics. Of the six people at the table, two are in their 70s and still working full time to supplement meagre pensions. Two others, who are

short of breath one day and fell to the ground. With no health insurance, he had to make himself bankrupt before he could get financial assistance for the bypass surgery he needed. "The bills were enough to give you a heart attack if you didn't have one before," he says. Now he's back, digging in the bay early every morning to catch whatever the season washes in. "If you're making a life fishing then you eat chicken one day and chicken feathers the next," he says. "You take the good with the bad."

As the convention season kicks off this week, there will be little mention of people like Fitzsimmons. The Republicans would rather forget he exists; the Democrats might talk about him, but they won't be talking talk to him. Both will certainly discuss the issues that matter most to him — jobs and health — but they won't address them in a way that will make a substantive difference to his daily life.

Still, Fitzsimmons is backing Democratic hopeful John Kerry, enthusiastically but with no illusions. He doesn't believe the Democrats will propose a socialised health care system that would cater adequately for him and his family, a fair-trade policy that would protect his livelihood from cheaper labour or an economic policy that would offer him more stable employment.

The fact that doing so would jeopardise any chance of a Democratic party victory only serves to highlight the glaring dysfunction in US political culture. Of the thousands of lobbyists at the two conventions over the next month, few, if any, speak for the poor. Big business has its eye on both parties; the poor have the ear of neither. In the words of Upton Sinclair: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

"These are the forgotten people," says Marty Shaw, who runs the Sea Coast Mission, which has a food pantry for those in need in nearby Cherryfield. "They don't count. They don't matter to either of the main parties." With more than half of its inhabitants living below the poverty line, Washington County is an extreme case. As a remote rural

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2000, five of them went for Gore and one for Bush; come November four will vote for Kerry, and two are thinking of switching to Ralph Nader.

Cynthia Huntington is one of them. She is 60 and has a hernia. But with no health insurance, she cannot afford an operation. So she has the choice of either waiting five years in pain and possibly peril so she can qualify for Medicare or having her operation now and handing her home over to the state after she dies.

She has worked all her life and does not want to leave her children with nothing. She doesn't know what she's going to do, and she doesn't believe the outcome of November's election will make the decision any easier. "They don't give a shit about us," she says. "They're all rich people and they're all run by corporations. They don't care about the fact that I need surgery and can't pay for it."

"You want to let Bush back in and make things even worse," asks Gladys Pollard. "Worse than what?" asks Huntington. "Kerry's not going to get me my operation."

Huntington says she may change her mind before the election and switch back to the Democrats. "I'll talk to her," whispers Gladys. And the fog chases the dusk in over the Tunk, so thick you can barely make out the hand in front of your face, let alone the banks on the other side.—*Dawn/Guardian Service*