

THE INDEPENDENT

Appalachians could be Obama's stumbling point

By Leonard Doyle in Roanoke, Virginia

Thursday, 18 September 2008

A smoky haze hung over the mountains of south-east Virginia yesterday as the sun burned into the pine. Here in the Appalachian Mountains the descendents of Scots-Irish settlers are a stubborn obstacle to Barack Obama's hopes of becoming the first Democratic candidate in 40 years to win in the once proud heartland of the old Confederacy.

While in the northern suburbs near Washington DC voters are in a swoon for Senator Obama's message of change, two hundred miles south these fiercely independent minded rural people are more sceptical.

At Billie Jo's breakfast joint, Barack Obama supporters were thin on the ground in what is sometimes called the "redneck belt" of America. Charles Graybill had just given his pack of beagles a morning run. He was scathing about the first-term Illinois senator, but not because he is black.

"I'm not a Democrat or a Republican," he said, "but what bothers me about Obama is that if he is elected, the people who blow up our troops will be dancing in the streets."

"I'd rather go with McCain, he's been around for a while and I don't believe the president can do much about the economy when the democrats run the Congress."

"The Democrats are bad on guns and hunting and I think Obama's got to be a bit of a racist for going to that church in Chicago for so long," Mr Graybill said.

If the Obama campaign has a big problem to overcome in the weeks ahead, it is here in the Appalachians, which stretch from Vermont to Tennessee. After 40 years of electing Republican candidates to the presidency, polls suggest that Mr Obama has a shot at winning Virginia, the capital of the old Confederacy. To this end his wife, Michelle, was campaigning in the state this week.

It is full of descendents of Scots-Irish immigrants who form the heart of the Christian evangelical movement and have a long tradition of joining the military.

Their champion is US senator and author James Webb, who says that "sophisticated" America misunderstands this culture.

"The Southern redneck is an easy target, with his stubbornness, his capacity for violence and his curious ways," he says.

Dave "Mudcat" Saunders, an organiser for the Democrats in rural Virginia, agrees and wants the sort of leadership that can forge an alliance between black Americans and the poor whites of the mountains. "The reasons people round here don't support Obama is not because he's a black fellow," he said over a southern breakfast of grits and bacon.

"He's got to show that he respects and even admires this redneck way of life.

"It's because he has not connected with them on a visceral level the way Kennedy, Clinton and Carter did. He's got to show some passion and demonstrate that he respects and even admires this redneck way of life that still shapes our culture," he said.

The biggest problem the Obama campaign faces here are his remarks that rural people cling to their guns and their religion when times are hard.

"I have a gun 'cos I always had one and my daddy had one 'cos he always had one," said Mr Saunders. "God forbid that I would ever have to use it, but there ain't nobody going to take it from me."

"People who don't even own guns around here are pro gun because they see it as a symbol of liberty," he added.

Senator Obama has been running ads on the radio promising that he will never take away the guns, but perceptions are harder to erase. There is also the fact that the Republicans are more ruthless when it comes to fighting elections and the perception that the Democratic establishment looks down its haughty nose at poor rural people.

"Obama needs to let loose and show his righteous side in the finishing weeks of this election," is the advice from "Mudcat" Saunders. "I know he has it in him. My friend the musician Ralf Stanley has endorsed him just because he has gospel music on his iPod, more people around here need to know that kind of stuff."

But while the locals in Billie Jo's tolerate Mudcat's enthusiasm for the

Democratic cause they are deeply sceptical that Mr Obama can win Virginia.

“People lie all the time and then they go in the booth vote with their gut, it’s not Obama,” said Tony Anderson, a trial lawyer from Roanoke. “I deal with liars all the time.”