

CLIMATE CHANGE DOUBT IS TEA PARTY ARTICLE OF FAITH¹

John M. Broder[©]

At a candidate forum here last week, Representative Baron P. Hill, a threatened Democratic incumbent in a largely conservative southern Indiana district, was endeavoring to explain his unpopular vote for the House cap-and-trade energy bill. It will create jobs in Indiana, reduce foreign oil imports and address global warming, Mr. Hill said at a debate with Todd Young, a novice Republican candidate who is supported by an array of Indiana Tea Party groups and is a climate change skeptic. “Climate change is real, and man is causing it,” Mr. Hill said, echoing most climate scientists. “That is indisputable. And we have to do something about it.”

A rain of boos showered Mr. Hill, including a hearty growl from Norman Dennison, a 50-year-old electrician and founder of the Corydon Tea Party. “It’s a flat-out lie,” Mr. Dennison said in an interview after the debate, adding that he had based his view on the preaching of Rush Limbaugh and the teaching of Scripture. “I read my Bible,” Mr. Dennison said. “He made this earth for us to utilize.”

Skepticism and outright denial of global warming are among the articles of faith of the Tea Party movement, here in Indiana and across the country. For some, it is a matter of religious conviction; for others, it is driven by distrust of those they call the elites. And for others still, efforts to address climate change are seen as a conspiracy to impose world government and a sweeping redistribution of wealth. But all are wary of the Obama administration’s plans to regulate carbon dioxide, a ubiquitous gas, which will require the expansion of government authority into nearly every corner of the economy. “This so-called climate science is just ridiculous,” said Kelly Khuri, founder of the Clark County Tea Party Patriots. “I think it’s all cyclical.” “Carbon regulation, cap and trade, it’s all just a money-control avenue,” Ms. Khuri added. “Some people say I’m extreme, but they said the John Birch Society was extreme, too.”

Whatever the party composition of the next Congress, cap and trade is likely dead for the foreseeable future. If dozens of new Republican climate skeptics are swept into Congress, the prospects for assertive federal action to control global warming gases, including regulation by the Environmental Protection Agency, will grow dimmer than they already are. Those who support the Tea Party movement are considerably more dubious about the existence and effects of global warming than the American public at large, according to a New York Times/CBS News Poll conducted this month. The survey found that only 14 percent of Tea Party supporters said that global warming is an environmental problem that is having an effect now, while 49 percent of the rest of the public believes that it is. More than half of Tea Party supporters said that global warming would have no serious effect at any time in the future, while only 15 percent of other Americans share that view, the poll found. And 8 percent of Tea Party adherents volunteered that they did not believe global warming exists at all, while only 1 percent of other respondents agreed.

Those views in general align with those of the fossil fuel industries, which have for decades waged a concerted campaign to raise doubts about the science of global warming and to undermine policies devised to address it. They have created and lavishly financed institutes to produce anti-global-warming studies, paid for rallies and Web sites to question the science, and

¹ The New York Times, October 20, 2010

generated scores of economic analyses that purport to show that policies to reduce emissions of climate-altering gases will have a devastating effect on jobs and the overall economy.

Their views are spread by a number of widely followed conservative opinion leaders, including Mr. Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, George Will and Sarah Palin, who oppose government programs to address climate change and who question the credibility and motives of the scientists who have raised alarms about it. Groups that help support Tea Party candidates include climate change skepticism in their core message. Americans for Prosperity, a group founded and largely financed by oil industry interests, has sponsored what it calls a Regulation Reality Tour to stir up opposition to climate change legislation and federal regulation of carbon emissions. Its Tea Party talking points describe a cap-and-trade system to reduce carbon emissions as “the largest excise tax in history.”

FreedomWorks, another group supported by the oil industry, helps organize Tea Party rallies and distributes fliers urging opposition to federal climate policy, which it calls a “power grab.” “Any effort to make electricity and fuel more expensive or to cap or regulate CO₂ will only exacerbate an already critical situation and cause tremendous economic damage,” FreedomWorks says on its Web site.

The oil, coal and utility industries have collectively spent \$500 million just since the beginning of 2009 to lobby against legislation to address climate change and to defeat candidates, like Mr. Hill, who support it, according to a new analysis from the Center for American Progress Action Fund, a left-leaning advocacy group in Washington. Their message appears to have fallen on receptive ears. Of the 20 Republican Senate candidates in contested races, 19 question the science of global warming and oppose any comprehensive legislation to deal with it, according to a National Journal survey.

The only exception is Mark Steven Kirk, the Republican Senate nominee in Illinois, who was one of only eight Republicans to vote for the House cap-and-trade bill sponsored by Representatives Henry A. Waxman of California and Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts, both Democrats. (One of the other Republican “yes” votes was cast by Representative Michael N. Castle of Delaware, who blames that vote in part for his primary election defeat by Christine O’Donnell, the Tea Party candidate and a global warming skeptic.) A large majority of Tea Party-supported House candidates also doubt global warming science and oppose energy legislation designed to address it. Mr. Young, the Indiana Republican nominee trying to unseat Mr. Hill for the Ninth Congressional District seat, strongly opposes cap and trade and other unilateral measures to combat global warming. He says he is uncertain what is causing the observed heating of the planet, adding that it could be caused by sunspots or the normal cycles of nature. “The science is not settled,” he said in an interview in his headquarters in Bloomington, Ind. And he said that given the scientific uncertainty, it was not wise to make major changes in the nation’s energy economy to reduce carbon emissions.

A third candidate in the Indiana Congressional race, Greg Knott, a libertarian, said he accepted the scientific consensus on climate change but opposed a nationwide cap-and-trade system as the answer. Lisa Deaton, a small-business owner in Columbus, Ind., who started We the People Indiana, a Tea Party affiliate, is supporting Mr. Young in part because of his stand against climate change legislation. “They’re trying to use global warming against the people,” Ms. Deaton said. “It takes away our liberty.” “Being a strong Christian,” she added, “I cannot help but believe the Lord placed a lot of minerals in our country and it’s not there to destroy us.”