

## Let's Not Talk about Climate Change

Mark J. Hanson, KUFM Commentary

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On Monday, the American Geophysical Union, America's largest association of climate scientists, announced a campaign to speak out about climate change. Citing fear that the window of opportunity to act is closing, John Abraham, an engineering professor at the University of St. Thomas, said that they have not done a good job communicating the dangers of climate change.<sup>i</sup> They plan to push back against their critics, some of whom now sit in the U.S. Congress.

I'm not too sanguine that more communication about facts will achieve significantly better results, and the reason for my pessimism lies in the depressing degree to which facts are increasingly disputed among legislators and voters alike. While promoting facts should always be *part* of getting effective politicians and policies, for divisive issues like climate change, we also need approaches that fit more comfortably with people's core beliefs.

The mid-term election highlighted the obstacles. According to the Center for American Progress, 50 percent of the more than 100 new Republican members of Congress are climate change skeptics, as were nineteen of the twenty Republican nominees for the Senate. And denying climate change is a virtual article of faith for the Tea Party.

What accounts for this? The most obvious answer is money. The fossil-fuel industry has spent half a billion dollars since 2008 to lobby against climate change legislation and to defeat political candidates who support it.<sup>ii</sup> Without limits on corporate campaign spending, we'll see much more of this.

But there are other possible explanations. Author Bill McKibben suggests that conspiracy thinking is behind some resistance, namely, that scientists are out to line their own pockets.<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, columnist Ross Douthat argues that deniers are reacting to what they believe are left-wing efforts to expand the government.<sup>iv</sup> Lisa Deaton, who founded a Tea Party affiliate in Indiana said, "They're trying to use global warming against the people. It takes away our liberty."<sup>v</sup>

These explanations suggest how resistance to climate change integrates easily into ideologies. And ideologies do not, as philosopher Hannah Arendt described, know any reliable criterion for distinguishing truth from falsehood.<sup>vi</sup> As Republican operative Karl Rove once explained, "We create our own reality."<sup>vii</sup>

Perhaps the most charitable explanation, however, comes from how climate change skepticism can be central to an individual's cultural identity and worldview. And according to the aptly titled study "When in Doubt, Shout," many Americans respond to facts that challenge their worldviews not by re-evaluating them, but by becoming more adamant in their defense.<sup>viii</sup>

The problem is that such intransigence has torn our country in ways that increasingly diminish the possibility of political action. A Pew Research Center poll last May found that a

plurality of Republican voters said they were less likely to vote for a candidate who will compromise with people with whom they disagree.<sup>ix</sup>

So what can be done? One model comes from the work of Nancy Jackson, chairwoman of the nonprofit Climate and Energy Project, whose work succeeded in lowering energy use in six conservative Kansas towns by up to 5 percent.<sup>x</sup> Her approach was to take the politically charged issue of climate change out of the conversation altogether and talk to people about issues that motivate them. Recognizing the importance of cultural views, she talked with people about religious motivations to protect the earth, their observations of changes in nature, dependency on foreign oil, and rescuing communities through energy-related jobs. Almost nothing was said about the climate.

The lesson seems to be that on the issues that divide us, we have to find ways to work on problems that avoid the alarm bells set off when deep cultural beliefs and ideological attachments are challenged.

We also must find more leadership like Jackson's outside of the political process. As columnist Bob Herbert reminds us, civil rights progress did not wait for presidential or Congressional leadership, and neither did the labor or women's movements.<sup>xi</sup>

But what about those issues over which governments have sole authority, like taxation and the national debt? Unless the views of roughly half of Americans simply don't count, we'll need more political flexibility than the my-way-or-the-highway approach of many political activists, and we'll certainly need stronger leadership than we've had so far. But there too, success will likely depend on having more sensitive ways of talking to each other than shouting and exacerbating cultural divides.

McKibben notes that in the end, however, some people change their views because they can no longer deny the reality right before their eyes. Let's hope that we can draw a lesson from Jackson and develop innovative ways of finding common ground and taking action despite differences—not merely communicating and disputing facts. Then we won't have to face the judgment rendered when reality overtakes our unyielding attachment to beliefs that are no longer tenable.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics, at the University of Montana.

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<sup>i</sup> Neela Banerjee, "Climate Scientists Prepare to Take the Fight to Skeptical Politicians," <http://www.startribune.com/politics/national/106860353.html?elr=KArksUUUoDEy3LGDiO7aiU>, accessed November 7, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> John M. Broder, "Climate Change Doubt is Tea Party Article of Faith," *New York Times*, October 21, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Bill McKibben, "Hot Mess," *The New Republic* (<http://www.tnr.com>), October 6, 2010.

<sup>iv</sup> Ross Douthat, "The Right and Climate Change," *New York Times*, July 25, 2010.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> Hannah Arendt, "On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding," *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 2005).

<sup>vii</sup> Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times Magazine* (October 17, 2004).

<sup>viii</sup> David Gal and Derek Rucker, "When in Doubt, Shout: Paradoxical Effects of Doubt on Proselytizing," *Psychological Science* (forthcoming).

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<sup>ix</sup> Charles M. Blow, “The Great American Cleaving,” November 5, 2010.

<sup>x</sup> Leslie Kaufman, “In Kansas, Climate Skeptics Embrace Cleaner Energy,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2010.

<sup>xi</sup> Bob Herbert, “Tone-Deaf in D.C.,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2010.