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By Tim Rutten | Los Angeles Times

It wasn't very long ago that a dinner party guest who wanted to spare the hostess any embarrassing contention simply avoided discussing religion or politics and stuck to the weather. Not anymore. In fact, it says something unutterably depressing about the state of the nation that we've finally managed to politicize even the climate.

Take, for example, the controversy that erupted on the eve of the global climate conference in Copenhagen, when hackers skeptical about global warming stole and released e-mails and documents from computers at the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in Britain. The center is an important source of baseline historical data on climate change, and the hackers claim the e-mails show that scientists there manipulated, suppressed and even falsified numbers to make a case for global warming. Others who've looked at the material say taking e-mails out of context creates misleading impressions, and that the worst you can say about the British climatologists is that they evinced an arrogant desire to keep what they regarded as the skeptics' "junk science" out of peer reviewed journals.

In either case, the unit's chief has stepped down, and an investigation is under way. Far more interesting has been the immediate reaction by the enthusiasts who've labeled the affair - what else? - Climategate.

Recently, former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin said the evidence of wrongdoing was clear and that President Barack Obama should scrap plans to attend the conference. In Hollywood, two conservatives, screenwriter Roger L. Simon and filmmaker Lionel Chetwynd, urged the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to take back the 2007 Oscar it gave to Al Gore's documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth."

The impact of this autonomic red-blue division often is amplified by the fact that we Americans are, by and large, technologically advanced but scientifically illiterate. Our national conversation is dominated by a culture of assertion rather than a respect for evidence reasonably assessed. Thus the endless wrangling over self-evident nonsense like creationism. It's precisely the insistence on treating a scientific theory, evolution, and an allegorical notion, creationism, with a faux evenhandedness that creates a situation in which 75 percent of Americans believe most scientists disagree over global warming.

In fact, the scientific consensus on the issue is broad and deep. Nor does it rely on science done at the Climatic Research Unit at East Anglia.

Even if something untoward occurred there, we have two other scientific organizations providing baseline climate data - both of which happen to be funded and directed by the U.S. government. One is NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, and the other is the Global

Historical Climatology Network - operated not by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Interior Department but by the Commerce Department. Their historical data essentially matches that compiled at East Anglia.

So what are we to believe: that huge numbers of British and American scientists have entered into a conspiracy to dupe the world on climate change? Why? What would they stand to gain?

As Alan I. Leshner, who heads the American Association for the Advancement of Science, wrote in The Washington Post recently: "It is wrong to suggest that apparently stolen e-mails ... somehow refute a century of evidence based on thousands of studies. ... Doubters insist that the Earth is not warming. This is in stark contrast to the consensus of 18 of the world's most respected scientific organizations, who strongly stated in an Oct. 21 letter to the U.S. Senate that human-induced climate change is real. Still, the doubters try to leverage any remaining points of scientific uncertainty about the details of warming trends to cast doubt on the overall conclusions shared by traditionally cautious, decidedly nonradical science organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science."

Long ago, Cicero suggested that a mysterious public act could be best assessed by asking this: Who benefits? Is it really any accident that Palin and most of the GOP lawmakers trying to discredit the science on global warming come from states enriched by petroleum production and industries with sizable carbon footprints? (The delegate from Saudi Arabia has taken a similar position at Copenhagen.)

If you feel as though you've been here before, think back on the long and agonizing debate over tobacco regulation and secondhand smoke. As additional tens of thousands died, Big Tobacco produced one eccentric scientific skeptic after another. Every one of them got a sympathetic hearing from lawmakers elected from tobacco-growing states.

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