

Palin the latest torch bearer for anti-science



JOHN GIBBONS

WHO LITERALLY believes that Jonah made his home in a whale's abdomen? Nobody really, apart from the US president – and the woman who was recently added to the 2008 Republican ticket.

Sarah Palin is the latest politician to carry the torch of science misinformation tainted by religious dogma lit during the Reagan administration and nurtured by George Bush.

Back in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan endorsed creationism, and the cottage industry of crackpot pseudo-science it has spawned, it signalled perhaps the most profound schism between politics and science in the modern era. "Flood geology", for instance, is an entire wing of anti-science invented to claim that the fossil record stretching back hundreds of millions of years was in fact all deposited during Noah's mythical flood just a few thousand years ago. Vigorous efforts are being made to have this rubbish taught as fact to schoolchildren.

Today's US neo-conservatives hearken back to a medieval era of religiosity and superstition, where people such as Galileo were harassed by the church for daring to speak the heresies of factual, observation-based science that every schoolchild in Ireland now takes for granted.

Yet centuries after the Enlightenment, Sarah Palin, the putative US vice-president, can endorse the passing off of Bible stories as scientific facts, dressed up as the oxymoronic term "creationist science".

In 2006, Palin said that evolutionary science and creationism should be taught alongside one another. "Teach both, don't be afraid of education. Healthy debate is so important, and it's so valuable in our schools," was her chilling pronouncement.

George Bush says he favours the teaching of "intelligent design" in US schools. This is "creationism in a cheap tuxedo", in the words of one commentator.

Up until two weeks ago, the consensus view within the scientific and environmental community was that, no matter who took up residence in the White House next January, global efforts to head off climate catastrophe would begin in earnest. Republican candidate John McCain is almost unique in his party in actually taking climate change seriously.

The catapulting of Sarah Palin onto the Republican ticket means all bets are off. She has positioned herself firmly to the right of even Bush with her pronouncement: "I'm not one who would attribute [global warming] to being man-made." Palin has, in an instant, threatened to turn the clock back on critical US action on climate change by a decade.

The irony of a climate change denier being based in Alaska is breathtaking. The state is

warming faster than practically anywhere else, with winter temperatures up by six degrees Fahrenheit since 1950. Visitors to Alaska can see the evidence all around, from "drunken forests" of semi-fallen trees and sunken roads, all unseated by the melting of the permafrost, to unprecedented forest fires.

There is no question of Palin being unaware of these realities. What is critical is how her ideological leaning blinkers her to scientific facts (such as evolution) in favour of what has become known as "sound science". This seemingly innocent term is a euphemism for bending science to the service of political, corporate or religious ideology. Her enthusiasm for the destruction of the pristine Arctic National Wildlife Refuge by drilling there for oil is further evidence of ideology trumping reason.

In his book, *The Republican War on Science*, investigative journalist Chris Mooney sets out a devastating indictment of the decades-long campaign waged by that party to place dogma, rather than reason, at the heart of US politics. While the election of Ronald Reagan was its big breakthrough, the assault on science has continued more or less unabated over the last 30 years. Tobacco regulation, acid rain, ozone, pesticide and pollution control and global warming have been a few of its targets. Removing regulations and silencing scientists has

“Today's US neo-conservatives hearken back to a medieval era of religiosity and superstition

reaped countless billions for some of the world's worst environmental offenders.

A poll published in May by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre found that belief among Republicans in the fact that the Earth is warming (irrespective of cause) actually fell sharply, to 49 per cent this year.

A comparison of the attitudes of college-educated Americans to the question of whether global warming is as a result of human activity is revealing. A full 75 per cent of Democrats with college degrees accept this to be true, in stark contrast with just 19 per cent of Republicans with degrees.

Support for this view is actually higher among less-educated Republicans, suggesting how ideology has contaminated education to the extent that the more education a Republican receives, the more misinformed they are likely to become. Today, exactly seven years since the September 11th attacks, novelist Sinclair Lewis's warning from 1935 bears repeating: "When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross."

John Gibbons is founder of climatechange.ie and writes the blog, ThinkOrSwim.ie