

'FLAT Earthers' in battle with creationism

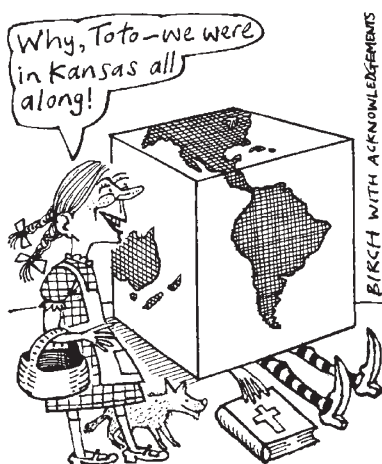
[SAN DIEGO] A group of US scientists and educators is using parody to fight creationism in a school board election in Kansas. The group argues, for example, that the teaching of 'round Earth theory' in schools should be questioned, as the Bible makes reference to the world having four corners (Revelations 7:1).

When creationists started an organization to diminish the teaching of evolution in schools in Lawrence, Kansas, the scientists formed FLAT — Families for Learning Accurate Theories. FLAT has posted its 'Biblical' views on the Internet.

"We don't necessarily all believe the world is flat," says Philip G. Kimball, FLAT's treasurer, an author with a masters degree in education from Stanford University. "Another possibility is a tetrahedron. The group isn't settled on the Earth's final form."

With tongues firmly planted in cheeks, FLAT members comment that the Bible says that π is 3, not 3.14 (I Kings 7:23), and that studying foreign languages is 'unbiblical', as God created many languages to prevent people from recreating the Tower of Babel.

In an interview with *Nature*, Kimball insisted on adhering to the satirical line. In contrast, Adrian L. Melott, a cosmologist at



the University of Kansas in Lawrence and another founder of FLAT, acknowledged that parody was being used because "reasoned argument with creationists has failed".

"The dialogue has given the public the idea that there are two sides to the story of equal weight," said Melott. "Scientifically, that isn't the case."

FLAT was formed to counter a group called Parents for Objective Science and History (POSH), formed by Ellen L. and Joel M.

Barber, who objected to their five-year-old son being taught in kindergarten that dinosaurs lived millions of years ago. As creationists, the Barbers say they believe the Earth was formed 10,000 to 60,000 years ago.

With a campaign under way for last Tuesday's (6 April) election for the board of the Lawrence Public Schools, the Barbers and POSH sought to persuade candidates to advocate teaching evolution as theory.

When FLAT parodied their efforts, Ellen Barber said she felt "ridiculed", adding: "They are trying to discredit our views. If they discredit God or the Bible, we are discredited." Melott denies this, saying that religion has its appropriate place in schools — but not as a so-called science.

Ironically, say Melott and Kimball, their FLAT campaign has brought them ridicule as well, with hate mail posted on the Internet and derision at home, because many people seem to have missed the joke. "My wife wants to use her maiden name for a couple of weeks," said Melott.

Humour aside, the issue of teaching creationism in schools is a serious business in Kansas. Creationists are lobbying the state board of education to include their view in statewide scientific standards. **Rex Dalton**

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