It's back to the future for Tennessee, where a new law was just put on the books that could undermine the teaching of accepted scientific thought in areas including evolution and climate change.

The law encourages teachers to “present the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories covered in the course being taught.” But, as noted by the nonprofit National Center for Science Education, the only examples given in the bill of “controversial” theories are “biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming, and human cloning.”

The legislation, passed by the Tennessee House and Senate, became law when Gov. Bill Haslam decided — for the first time in his nearly 15-month administration — not to sign the bill nor to veto it, according to The Commercial Appeal. Thus, by default, despite the fact that science educators called it anti-scientific, the legislation became law.

In a statement absent of any sense of leadership, Haslam said:

“I have reviewed the final language of HB 368/SB 893 and assessed the legislation’s impact. I have also evaluated the concerns that have been raised by the bill. I do not believe that this legislation changes the scientific standards that are taught in our schools or the curriculum that is used by our teachers. However, I also don’t believe that it accomplishes anything that isn’t already acceptable in our schools. The bill received strong bipartisan support, passing the House and Senate by a three-to-one margin, but good legislation should bring clarity and not confusion. My concern is that this bill has not met this objective. For that reason, I will not sign the bill but will allow it to become law without my signature.”

The bill offers protections for teachers who help students critique “scientific weaknesses” of certain theories. Critics argued that this is code for attacks on evolution and other theories, which encourages critical thinking by protecting teachers from discipline if they help students critique “scientific weaknesses.”

The problem is that there is no important “scientific weakness” in the theory of evolution that could scientifically undermine its essential truth. Scientists agree that it is the animating principle of modern biology. Scientists also agree on the reality of climate change.
“Telling students that evolution and climate change are scientifically controversial is miseducating them,” said the National Center for Science Education’s executive director, Eugenie C. Scott. “Good science teachers know that. But the Tennessee legislature has now made it significantly harder to ensure that science is taught responsibly in the state’s public schools.”

According to the National Center for Science Education, the sponsor of the bill in the Tennessee House, Rep. Bill Dunn, said that the legislation would not protect teachers who want to teach “intelligent design” as an alternative theory to evolution. However, in an opinion piece in The Chattanooga, the bill’s chief lobbyist, David Fowler of the Family Action Council of Tennessee, makes clear that he thinks it does.

Intelligent design, or creationist theory, is in fact not a scientific alternative view to evolution. Though there are different varieties of creationist theory, or intelligent design, they all refer to the religious belief that God intervenes, or did intervene, in the physical world.

The National Center for Science Education provides information and resources for schools, parents and others working to keep evolution and climate science in public school science education.

Some critics said the bill harkens back to the ‘Scopes Monkey Trial’ of 1925, a landmark trial in which a Tennessee high school science teacher, John Scopes, was accused of violating a state law that made it illegal to teach evolution in public schools. He was found guilty but the verdict was quickly overturned on a technicality. The trial was seen as pitting modernists, who believed in the march of science, and fundamentalists who believed the Bible was the literal word of God.

The new Tennessee law does not ban the teaching of evolution as the old law had. Its supporters contend that it will allow the expansion of scientific views in the classroom. What it does do is allow doubt to be injected into areas of science in which scientists say there really isn’t any. It allows creationism and evolution to be debated side by side in a science classroom, which is just plain wrong, even if the Tennessee legislature thinks otherwise.

Anti-evolution bills have been introduced this year in at least six states. The continued assault on science in some state legislatures only makes it harder for young Americans to learn about their world.

Earlier this year we were treated to these remarks of New Hampshire Rep. Jerry Bergevin, who sponsored an anti-evolution bill in the Granite State’s legislature: “I want the full portrait of evolution and the people who came up with the ideas to be presented. It’s a worldview and it’s godless. Atheism has been tried in various societies, and they’ve been pretty criminal domestically and internationally. The Soviet Union, Cuba, the Nazis, China today: they don’t respect human rights.”

Louisiana passed a law in 2008 that gives teachers license to equate creationism with evolution. Leading the fight