

Danes Tell Germans: Build Great Projects!

by Rainer Apel

The Danish-German project of a bridge across the Fehmarn Belt, finally signed on June 29, after years of stonewalling from the German side, has sparked a broader public debate about revitalizing frozen infrastructure development in northern Germany, in the regions directly bordering on Denmark. It has not yet reached the intensity of the Danish debate, which was initiated by the LaRouche-affiliated Schiller Institute's proposal to build a maglev train grid in Denmark; but particularly in northern Germany, considerable interest in realizing long-overdue projects of highway, railway, port, and canal construction has already been voiced.

The German Federal government, which reluctantly agreed to shoulder 15% of the bridge construction costs, and welcomed Denmark's shouldering 85%, tried to play down the importance of the project. The government of the northern-most state of Schleswig-Holstein, however, wholeheartedly welcomed the agreement as a door-opener for infrastructure and industry development. In an address before the state parliament July 9, state governor Harry Peter Carstensen gave full support to the Fehmarn Belt Bridge project, saying it is crucial for establishing a modern road-rail transport corridor from continental Europe to Scandinavia. He said that if the flanking infrastructure is built, Schleswig-Holstein would, by about the year 2020, be located at the crossroads of two grand continental transport routes through Europe's northern regions, North-South and West-East.

Carstensen called on German firms to get engaged beyond the building of the road-rail link from Germany to the bridge, as agreed in the German-Danish government treaty, and to make sure that the project is not limited to the state of Schleswig-Holstein. What is needed is more investments in production along the route, to also have the benefit of creating new jobs, Carstensen said, adding that he has received a promise also from EU Commission president José Manuel Barroso for EU co-funding of the bridge project with 30% of the total expenses.

On July 2, the three chambers of industry and commerce in Schleswig-Holstein had endorsed the Fehmarn Belt Bridge as an "important European infrastructure project." In a joint statement, the chambers of Kiel, Lübeck, and Flensburg said that "a bridge across the Fehmarn Belt, with four lanes and two rail tracks, will have positive effects for all of Northern Europe. The bridge is a project of European

importance and it is certain to generate a positive impact on the entire area of the southern Baltic and beyond. The positive impact will radiate deeply into the Central European space." It is indispensable, the statement said, to add infrastructure development on the German side to utilize the bridge's full potential: That includes the extension westward of the A-20 highway, as well as the extension of the A-7 highway, and the electrification of the rail route Hamburg-Lübeck. These projects have to be put in the larger perspective of the "axis of growth Hamburg-Lübeck-Copenhagen-Malmö," the chambers said.

The organization of all 14 chambers of industry in northern Germany, IHK Nord, followed with an endorsement of the project on July 17, in the context of a call for the realization of long-overdue infrastructure development as urgent to secure almost a million industrial jobs in Germany's northern regions. Presenting the statement, which listed about 20 delayed highway, railway, port, and canal projects, Hans Peter Kolzen of the State Chamber of Industry and Commerce said: "All too often, politicians nourish visions of a post-industrial, service sector society... In reality, industry in northern Germany is one of the pillars of Germany's role as a base of production and exports... Industry is the backbone of the economy."

In a discussion with this author July 18, a spokesman for the chamber in Hamburg responded positively to the Schiller Institute proposal to use maglev trains rather than conventional rail for the planned bridge. The spokesman said that the concept of a maglev link from Copenhagen to Hamburg would "re-open discussion about a route from Hamburg to Hanover, and, naturally, from Hamburg to Berlin," the latter route was buried by the German government in early 1999. He said that a maglev system would be even easier to realize for the Fehmarn and other bridges, implying that the costs of these projects could be kept lower than if traditional railway systems were used.

On July 20, the industry chamber in Lübeck published yet another statement pointing to the enormous increase in commodity transport between Sweden and Germany, which the Fehmarn Belt Bridge can be expected to yield. Therefore, a two-track rail link built into that bridge, rather than the one-track version that politicians presently speak about (to keep construction costs lower) is a must, the statement said. It is also a must because the bridge will considerably increase passenger travel on high-speed trains in both directions between Hamburg, Copenhagen, and Stockholm. The Lübeck chamber added that this perspective makes it even more urgent to go for the long-overdue electrification of some of the railroads in Schleswig-Holstein, which borders on Denmark, to increase their capacity.

All of which proves the essence of an old saying that, "It takes a Dane to show the German the way." In this particular case, it was the Danes at the Copenhagen Schiller Institute.