

Public opinion: manipulation or open debate?

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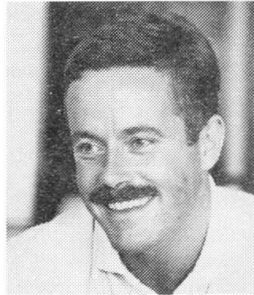
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Public Opinion - Manipulation or Open Debate?
Opinion publique: manipulation ou débat démocratique?
Oeffentliche Meinung - Beeinflussung oder offene Debatte?

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SUMMARY

Public opinion - the accept of which is necessary for any major project in a democracy - has been manipulated to accept an independent motorway connection across the Great Belt. This has been done partly by misleading marketing of the bridge as being "environmentally neutral" and partly by omitting comparisons with the real alternative, i. e. a bored railway tunnel. This has added to the credibility crisis of the political system in Denmark.

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Opinion publique: manipulation ou débat démocratique?

Résumé

Le soutien de l'opinion publique est nécessaire pour la réalisation de tout projet majeur dans une démocratie. Hors celle-ci a été manipulée en vue de l'acceptation d'une liaison routière permanente à travers le Great Belt. Ceci a été rendu possible par une présentation mensongère du pont "neutre du point de vue de l'environnement" d'une part, et par l'omission de comparaisons avec une réelle alternative, c'est-à-dire un tunnel ferroviaire d'autre part. Cette situation contribue à la crise de crédibilité du système politique au Danemark.

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Oeffentliche Meinung - Beeinflussung oder offene Debatte?

Zusammenfassung

Die öffentliche Meinung - ohne die in einer Demokratie kein grösseres Projekt verwirklicht werden kann - wurde beeinflusst, um eine unabhängige Autobahnverbindung über den Grossen Belt zu erreichen. Dies geschah teilweise durch irreführende Anpreisung der Brücke als "umweltmässig neutral" und teilweise durch Weglassen des Vergleichs mit der wirklichen Alternative, einem gebohrten Eisenbahntunnel. Das alles hat zur Vertrauenskrise des politischen Systems /in Dänemark beigetragen.



In a democracy very large government initiatives must be accepted by a broad section of the population; the initiative and/or the government are otherwise doomed to fall.

It is a traditional - but hopefully soon a thing of the past - engineering attitude to consider public debate about large construction projects as a distraction, a painful marketing task to which one must condescend in order to get on with the real task, i.e. construction.

Another - related - attitude to the creation of the public opinion may be found in the modern marketing techniques. In this, the public opinion is solely considered as something to be subject to manipulation in order to be able to sell the product. The product can be anything: a political candidate, a religion, a pair of jogging shoes - or a bridge connection.

Seen from the point of view of the nature and environment organisations the lobbying efforts to make the Danish population accept a bridge connection across the Great Belt has been marked by a mixture of traditional engineering contempt for the public opinion and modern marketing smartness aimed at selling the product on qualities which are either doubtful, or the product in fact does not possess.

The advocates for the bridge projects have from the start perceived that the public concern for the environment is so great that the project probably would meet insurmountable public resistance if it could not be presented as harmless or perhaps even advantageous for the environment.

§2 of the 1986-agreement between five political parties which opened the way for the political realization of the project, states the following:

"The two stages (of the project) shall each be carried out in an environmentally appropriate manner so as to provide, in consideration of the water environment in the Baltic Sea, an unchanged water flow".

This formulation has subsequently by the politicians behind the projects in public been termed as a requirement stipulating that the projects shall be "environmentally neutral".

In the same way that the Danish Viking King Canute the Great by command was unable to demand that the English tide recede, just as little can these incantations change the physical reality created by such comprehensive project as the construction of a bridge connection across the Great Belt. There is no reality behind the formulation in the political agreement and still less behind a broader requirement about environmental neutrality.

As regards the actual water environment, the conditions are as follows:

In the first place, A/S Storebæltsforbindelsen agrees that the construction of the bridge will entail a lasting alteration of the so-called nearby area, i.e. a zone of 30 km around the connection. The conditions in the Langeland Sound will according to information from the company also be changed in the longterm. In both areas changes will occur in the water flow and in the salt and oxygen balance.

Secondly, A/S Storebæltsforbindelsen agrees that during the ten years of construction works "problems with spreading of sediments" will occur. Hereby is meant that an extensive muddying of Storebælt will take place as a result of excavations and reclamation of raw materials from the sea bottom.

Thirdly, the international expert panel summoned by A/S Storebæltsforbindelsen has established that changes in the nearby area "potentially may effect the ecology further away" i.e. the Baltic Sea.

To this should be added that the calculations made for the effect of the water environment have never included the total synergetic effect of constructing not only a bridge connection across the Great Belt, but also one across the Sound and later on probably a fixed link across the Fehmern Belt. These three projects are politically so interrelated with each other that one leads to the other. The effects should therefore be considered together.

The effects on the water flow and the salt and oxygen content are, however, by far not the only environment effect associated with the construction of the Great Belt Link.

Also for the other - far reaching - effects, it is meaningless to speak about environment neutrality.

Very large amounts of sea bed materials are moved around on the bottom of the Great Belt, partly because they are to be used in the construction proper of the fixed link, and partly because they are included in the so-called compensation excavations aimed at ensuring the same water flow as prior to the project. This refurbishing of the sea bottom entails negative effects for bird life, fish life, archaeological interests and the marine geology.

During the excavation work it appeared that the disturbance of the bottom was far more extensive than anticipated. It is interesting that this has not stopped the excavation and the employment of other excavation plant. This is despite the reassurance of the public that A/S Storebæltsforbindelsen by means of a comprehensive control and monitoring programme should follow up on unanticipated and unwanted effects and take action to correct for them.

Also as regards the landscape, it is evidently meaningless to speak of an environmentally neutral solution. On both sides of the Great Belt very large encroachments have been made on the landscape in order to execute the works associated with the project, and the island of Sprogø in the Great Belt has been partially consumed by the construction works.



To this should finally be added - very significantly - the effects which the independent motorway connection entail for the total energy consumption and thereby the air pollution.

The very existence of an independent motorway connection will have a stimulating effect on the total amount of cars and trucks moving across the Great Belt. In calculations carried out by A/S Storebæltsforbindelsen this so-called "leap in traffic" has been assessed to be an increase of traffic between 50-100% in relation to the present traffic amount. Also for this it is true that a complete evaluation of the motorway connections across the Great Belt, the Sound and Fehmern Belt has never been performed.

It applies in any case than an increase in the road traffic is highly undesirable from the point of view of the environment. The air pollution from the traffic comprises an ever increasing share of the total air pollution, also with CO₂. The EEC-commission have issued increasingly clearer warnings against both the increased air pollution over Europe and again the increasing overloading of the road system, especially in the European road centres.

Similarly, the Danish Government's action plans for traffic, energy and environments make it a goal to reduce the air pollution contribution from the traffic significantly.

This goal is clearly missed with an independent motorway connection with associated leap in traffic and derived increases in the car and truck traffic in general.

From a long term environmental point of view this is probably the greatest harm caused by an independent motorway connection across the Great Belt - and the Sound - and Fehmern Belt. A very considerable investment is being made here in entirely the wrong direction for the development of our transportation policy. A course of development which, furthermore, is absolutely contrary to that which the governments involved in general have as their declared policy.

This is obviously a perspective which, for the lobby behind the bridge connection, it has been important not to discuss. In order to avoid the discussion it has been a part of the marketing strategy never to be willing to compare the economical and environmental consequences of a bridge connection with its sole realistic alternative, i.e. a bored railway tunnel with room for a car train. The bridge lobby wanted to make comparisons with continued ferry traffic only.

This has lead to a confused public debate because it has never been made clear which alternatives in fact have been available. Supporters of a bridge as well as supporters of a bored railway tunnel have been able to postulate that their project environmentally and economically is the better one. Better than what?

The bridge project is economically and environmentally better than the ferry traffic; however, the bored railway tunnel is economically and environmentally better than the bridge project. And, as could be inquired in a logic exercise for pupils in 3rd grade: Which one is then the better one?

The bored railway tunnel is not only preferable in respect of energy consumption and thereby air pollution. It will also by its nature not affect the water flow, and salt and energy content, nor the bottom conditions of the Great Belt. It is, in these respects, something as rare as really environmentally neutral.

However, this option has never officially been elucidated jointly with the independent motorway connection.

In summary, the bridge lobby's marketing strategy has probably had the effect that the public opinion - as a result of the ambiguity created about the options available - has not openly revolted against the bridge construction.

In return, the construction has left wide segments of the population with a disagreeable feeling that "something has been pulled down over their heads". In relation to the nature and environment organisations, it has been yet another depressing example of the gap between words and action in the political system whenever it concerns environmental subjects.

The result has thereby been that the Danish political system has been pushed further into the credibility crisis in which it is already placed.

These negative effects will be enforced if - or perhaps rather when - the motorway connections across the Sound and Fehmern Belt are to be promoted with the same marketing technique.

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