

June 2, 2003 – Plenary Session I

Mr. Svend Auken

Former Minister of Environment and Energy, Denmark

Thank you very much Your Holiness, distinguished clergy, dear friends.

I am very honoured to be here at your opening plenary session for this very important symposium. Actually I think it is a wonderful idea that the Orthodox Church will come to the Baltic to teach us Christian concern for the environment and I greatly appreciate that and I hope this will be an inspiration to our Nordic churches, some of them rather passive in this respect. I hate to say that my own church, the Lutheran Church of Denmark, unfortunately has not taken the same strong interest as you have shown by being here today. It is an inspiration to us and I think by laying out the philosophical and theological foundation for a Christian commitment to ecology, you have lended a great service to us all.

Unfortunately I cannot completely comply with the wishes of the Cardinal which is I fear a cardinal sin that you cannot do so. I will not be able to follow in the vein of the distinguished previous speaker. I'll be much more practical in talking about environment cooperation in the Baltic area.

But first of all let me preface those remarks by a brief introduction on myself because due to the strains of Danish politics, I did not get around to writing a curriculum vitae for your papers here. Although professionally a teacher at the university, I've spent most of my life in Parliament. I entered Parliament in September 1971, I'm the proud survivor of thirteen general elections, I've served my country fourteen years as a minister, and nine of those were as environment minister and later as environment and energy minister. And in that respect I've worked a great deal with the Baltic Sea.

My government, the last government, the last Social Democratic government in Denmark, made the protection of the environment the highest priority of the government. Subsequent to the recommendations of Rio, we decided to move beyond the target of 1% of our GDP in overseas development assistance, we would move towards 1.5%. And we were very close when we unfortunately lost the election to reach that target of 1.5% of our ODA. It may not sound like much, but I may say that in international comparison it is by far the highest number of any country in the world. We reserved that increase of .5% for peace, prevention of war, stability and environment purposes. Half of the new money should go for the environment and most of that was devoted to crucial areas in the Third World and to Central and Eastern Europe.

It has been my privilege as a minister to oversee thirteen hundred concrete projects for Central and Eastern Europe, most of them from the period of the early nineties to after the year 2000. The Cardinal mentioned to you thermal energy in Poland. Just take that: that was one of the first Polish-Danish projects, and I was there initiating with the bishop the first unit outside Stettin, the first unit of geothermal power there and I completely concur with that. All these projects—we had an annual budget of approximately 100 million euros a year—involved not aid in a traditional sense, but involved partnership, cooperation with regard to all kinds of problems and challenges and opportunities. Waste-water treatment, cleansing of bi-filters, new technologies in power production, fisheries, clean technologies in industry, preservation of original biodiversity and so forth.

We all blame communism, justly so, for of course lack of democracy and so forth, but also for its pollution. But the communists were strange: they were on the spot polluters. That means that they concentrated their pollution to industrial sites, ports and so forth, and mines, and concrete farms. But they left the rest of nature untouched. Therefore the true beauties of untouched nature in Europe still remaining to us, much of it fortunately in this area, is due to the fact that man was not allowed under the communist system to exploit the natural riches. So therefore we still, due to this fact, this almost undeserved gift to us through the enlargement of Europe, we have this fantastic gift given to us of the nature of Central and Eastern Europe, which of course we should do all in our power to preserve.

And Denmark engages itself, like Sweden, Finland and so forth as well, in working together with governments, NGO's and so forth all around the Baltic and down through the central-eastern European area in order to make projects of this nature.

Now cooperation in the Baltic on the environment field is in fact rather old. It is more than thirty years old. In fact it was the first international cooperation in the environment field. And it happened at a time when the Cold War still dominated the picture in the Baltic Sea. Denmark, Western Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany, of course belonged to NATO. The Communists: the German Democratic Republic of East Germany, Poland, and Russia belonged to the Warsaw Pact. And all the Baltic Republics, as they were called then, of course belonged to the Soviet Union. And therefore the Baltic was very much the sea of contention. All our defenses in Denmark, for instance, were built up against a naval attack from Poland and the Soviet Union.

Of course this has all changed, but it the great fortune of all of us that it happened that despite these Cold War differences we were able to sustain and build up an environment cooperation in this area.

I think it happened for three different reasons.

First of all, the problems were very real. Already then, the pollution from man, from shipping and so forth, was taking its toll on the fragile ecology of the Baltic Sea.

Secondly, there was a strong feeling of environmental awareness. Interestingly enough, you may recall that the first nationalistic movements of the Baltic States were in fact the environment movement. All the national forces were gathered—in East Germany it was the Evangelical Church—but in the Baltic Area it was the environment movement, protection of the environment, that really made the nationalists democratic forces congregate. So the environmental awareness was very strong.

And third, I think, the point that the communists made, the Warsaw Pact made a proposal for turning, for converting the Baltic Sea into the Sea of Peace, meant that the environment was an apt, for both sides, an apt ground for cooperation very early.

Therefore, for more than thirty years we've had this strong environmental cooperation in the Baltic. We've build up an institution called HELCOM that you will hear more of during your symposium. HELCOM was the Helsinki committee consisting of experts making experts' assessments of the state of the environment and making recommendations to governments and these recommendations

were by regular ministerial meetings adopted and enacted by governments, despite all the political difficulties.

To this day HELCOM is doing a very important thing, playing a very important role. Also we had the cooperation of the European Union on spatial planning playing a part. And later on Agenda 21, initiated originally by the Swedes, came to play a very important part. Now of course in the beginning all of our concerns were with what ecologists and environmentalists call end of pipe technologies. That was to ensure prevention of pollution or dealing with pollution even transcending end of pipe technologies like filters in higher chimneys, waste water treatment, solid waste mechanism that in fact it benefited even our own economies by doing so. Cleaner technologies are very often more efficient technologies. And by moving and making these technological leaps, we could in fact ensure both a satisfactory economic result and a good environmental result. And this has moved through a web of contact on a multi-lateral and bi-lateral basis, we have seen this being built up all over the Baltic Sea.

Now what are the challenges for the Baltic Sea? I'll just highlight some of them. I know you will return to them during your symposium here. First of all we have the problem of shipping and there are two main problems of shipping that we should address.

First, the transport of oil and the oil spills from normal shipping. Our shores are tremendously vulnerable to any oil spill disaster. And we know that oil transports are increasing by the day, and that the Russians are building a big harbor for oil transport in Premosk that will be one of the world's leading ports in oil transport. Now if ever a disaster happened in our waters, it would be irreparable, and therefore it is absolutely key that we ensure that the ships that sail in our waters are the highest standard possible. Unfortunately that is not so. I hate to say this, because we are traveling on a ship with a flag of convenience, but many of the most dangerous, hazardous ships—single-hulled, badly manned ships, are sailed under flag of convenience. They of course should be banned. All bad ships should be banned in our area. And it should be mandatory that the crew of all these ships should be able to understand one another, understand international language and manage a situation like that. Unfortunately, this is not so. And therefore the risk of a real huge disaster lurks here, as it does in the Mediterranean, every day.

The second big challenge of shipping is of course air pollution. It may come as a surprise to you when I tell you that the sulfur pollution of Sweden is twice as high from marine sources, from shipping, as it is from domestic sources. Twice as high. And we have of course therefore to do something about the fuels, the heavy fuels, banning the heavy fuels used in shipping.

The third big problem of course is the, when you come to the sea, is fisheries. The fisherman are our allies in most of these attempts to clean the Baltic Sea, protect the Baltic Sea. But due to industrial fisheries and so forth we have had unsustainable fisheries that have killed or at least greatly diminished major fisheries, especially codfish, but also threatening herrings and so forth in the Baltic Sea. And therefore we have to impose strong regulations on the fisheries. And I'll return to this in a second.

Then there is the land-based pollution of the Baltic Sea. Although we are sparsely populated—less than fifty million people actually live close to the Baltic Sea—I mean, compared to Mediterranean and to the North Sea and so forth, that's not very many people—but there have been identified by

the HELCOM experts more than eight hundred so-called hotspots where pollution, untreated wastewater and so forth are being let out into the sea.

But not only do we get all this strain from urban sources of pollution, we also get it from agriculture, not least in my own country. Modern industrial agriculture leads to an over-nutrication of the waters, lead to what the experts call nutrification of the waters, and the big danger for all of us is that if Poland, the Baltic States, Russia and so forth, pick up and use the same kinds of technologies that we use in our agriculture, it will be a disaster for the Baltic Sea.

Finally, there is the danger of the military—it used to be a big problem, now it is under control. I hate to say this, but the great chance of the Baltic Sea has been the de-industrialization that has happened in the former communist countries, after the fall of the Wall.

Now what are the solutions to this?

First of all we have a huge opportunity in the enlargement of the community. There's no doubt that what happened to the united Europe means a great chance for the Baltic Sea. Now all these countries that I mentioned before are now independent, democratic states and all of them but Russia are members of the European Union, and that means that we can lay down European Union rules in this area provided, and I'll return to that at the conclusion of my statement here, provided we get a working relationship with the Russians. We can set the rules here, and we should make the Baltic area a pioneer area for international cooperation in the environment, to the benefit economically as well as environmentally for all.

And we can do so, we can for example make EU rules on the shipping that I mentioned, all the questions of double-hulled, flags of convenience, lack of piloted ships and so forth; we can set up the enforceable rules for fishing; we have clean air directives for air pollution; we have a nitrate directive on agriculture; we have a programme for protection of wetlands; and we have money available for joint projects to combat land-based sources of pollution. We can do that. The problem is: do we want to do it? Do we really want to do it? And there unfortunately, and I hate to say this, that maybe as a result of part of our successes there is a declining awareness in the importance, at least in the political circles in the government, in the Nordic area for the environment.

And the enlargement has happened, which I think our Polish friends here can attest to, in a sense of strained budgets that are completely unlike the enlargement with Greece, the enlargement of Spain and Portugal, or even with Ireland, Denmark and the United Kingdom earlier. The budgets are so tight now that there's a real danger that we will have many of the ill-effects of modern development in this area without strong common financing of common projects to deal with this threat. Therefore my government has been a consistent supporter, not only of the enlargement but also that we should do that on decent financial terms in order to allow us to put demands on the new member states. As His Holiness pointed out this morning, their economic conditions are much inferior to ours, and therefore in order to have a truly equitable, efficient cooperation, I think it is absolutely necessary that we find the necessary finances. We have so many chances, both in the economic and the environment sphere.

May I turn to my final remarks, and that's about Europe and Russia. The Europeans have tended to shrink away from a realistic relationship with Russia.

First it was that the Russian Federation was the main part of the Soviet Union. It was our enemy. And we built up our defenses to that and we feared them. We just wanted them to stay away from us. They were our neighbours, and Denmark, I'm proud to say, never was at war with Russia, but we wanted them to stay away. Now after the fall of the Wall, there was an optimism with regard to cooperation with the Russians and many projects were instigated and that was very good, but then came a huge disappointment with democracy and a new capitalism, also called the robber capitalism, of Russia.

And again Europe shied away and wanted to make the enlargement with Central Europe and fortunately also with the Baltic States, but leaving Russia aside. And therefore today, unfortunately, there is no realistic policy towards Russia and other former parts of the Soviet Union not joining the European Union now. And this we pay a heavy penalty for in the Baltic Sea.

And my hope here in the conclusion is that your visit here will lead us to a much stronger cooperation with Russia. It is unacceptable that the European Union not evolve stronger policies in its own nearby area, and Russia of course is absolutely key. We cannot do anything effectively with our problems – with stability in this area, and especially with the environment of the Baltic. So therefore reconciliation, cooperation with the Russians is absolutely key to our common future.

Thank you very much.