

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Austerity policy kills CDU votes

The May 8 elections in Schleswig-Holstein brought out a mass "depression vote" of protest.

Political developments in Denmark are not the only threat to NATO's position on the Baltic flank. The results of the May 8 elections in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein are just as threatening.

All 44 districts went to the opposition Social Democrats (SPD) in a landslide. Scoring 54.8% of the vote (an increase of 9.4% over the elections in September 1987), the SPD can now rule the state alone.

The program of the SPD's new state governor, Björn Engholm, calls for the dismantling of the state's three nuclear power plants, conversion of its military-industrial sector, and demilitarization of the state in general. The SPD organization of this state has pioneered in cooperation with the ruling communist party of neighboring East Germany since the spring of 1984, and it calls for the same "nuclear-free zone" nonsense as the Social Democrats of Denmark.

With Governor Engholm, the SPD has taken power after 38 years of unbroken rule by the Christian Democrats (CDU), which garnered only 33.3% of the vote, a loss of 9.3% since last year's elections.

How is such a dramatic shift in voters' behavior possible, especially if one keeps in mind that the SPD's views are known to be left-wing and even overtly pro-Soviet? How can a constituency that elected conservative governments over a period of 38 years, turn to a left-wing candidate now?

One reason is the "confidence gap." Early elections were called for May 8, after the previous CDU state governor, Uwe Barschel, had resigned from his post shortly after the

September 1987 elections and was found dead in a Geneva hotel room on Oct. 11. He had gotten in the way of a network of international arms and drug dealers, while trying to investigate an airplane crash which almost killed him on May 31, 1987, and the wave of scandals that had caused his resignation.

Barschel's death in a hotel bathtub was bizarre, as was the media cover-up of his case as an "affair of individual immorality." The CDU leadership of Schleswig-Holstein, chaired by federal Finance Minister Gerhard Stoltenberg, told its own party base that Barschel committed suicide because he found no other way out of his "scandals."

Not all members of the CDU shared this view, however. Many believed in the assassination hypothesis. Some 15% of the CDU party base quit in disgust over the cover-up operation, and the party organization lost many campaign workers. For a party that had to do additional campaign work to compensate for the bad economic and social policy reputation of the Bonn government of CDU Chairman Chancellor Helmut Kohl, this drain of supporters and members was lethal.

The socio-economic aspect was key to the election result of May 8. The state of Schleswig-Holstein is a small landstrip in Germany's north, with a western coast on the Atlantic and an eastern one on the Baltic. It has been hit hard by the collapse of its shipbuilding industry over the past 10 years. All of its traditional centers of shipbuilding and maritime commerce suffered a dramatic rise in unemploy-

ment. Kiel, the state capital, has a jobless rate of 15%, the port city of Lübeck 15.6%, of Rendsburg 15.3%, of Flensburg 18.2%. Youth unemployment is higher than those averages.

For the past 10 years, a growing share of shipbuilding has depended on contracts from the German Navy. The fiscal austerity policies of the federal government, coupled with the cabinet's illusions that arms control talks between East and West would help to reduce defense budgets, led to an almost total disappearance of military contracts. The shipbuilding crisis hit many medium-sized companies in the supply sector, too. The ensuing collapse of the revenue base made the state one of the poorest of the 10 German states.

The state's farmers also hold the Bonn government, and especially Finance Minister Stoltenberg, responsible for the collapse of credit and agricultural prices. Farmers' protests against this policy proved to be as fruitless as the protests of the shipbuilders.

Thus, on May 8, the strong sentiments against the policy in Bonn came together at the polls with the broad disgust at the CDU's policy on the state level. The Christian Democrats lost voters by massive abstention and crossover to the opposition SPD. The CDU lost heavily in its traditional strongholds in the countryside and the port cities.

For Chancellor Kohl, the election catastrophe of May 8 means that his majority in the state chamber has shrunk to four votes. Given the increasing tensions between his federal government in Bonn and even the CDU-governed states, this majority may turn into a minority very easily on any given issue. Kohl will not get any important legislation passed. This means ungovernability, and the Chancellor's fall in the short run.