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Saturday, Jun. 25, 2011

Darnell Chadwick Grisby: High-speed rail and the culture war

Is the way you travel a cultural issue? A growing number of politicians would like for you to think it is.

This week the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee presented a plan to privatize the national rail system. The plan is light on substance, but does offer the chairman a platform from which to kill Amtrak-which he says is a "soviet-style train system."

High-speed rail is another example. Just two years ago, high-speed rail was widely supported by both parties. Now, high-speed rail has become a conservative punching bag.

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Diane Harkey, a Republican state assemblywoman from Dana Point, recently called California's high-speed rail project "cultural genocide." She is not alone in the tone of her rhetoric. George Will, the national conservative columnist, claims high-speed rail supporters have a goal of "diminishing Americans' individualism in order to make them more amenable to collectivism."

Conservatism itself does not presage opposition to high-speed rail. Both Republican and Democratic governors applied for high-speed rail funding, and one of the winners was

a tea party favorite.

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party is pressing forward with its own high-speed rail project, even as it pursues efforts to address their nation's budget deficit. The Conservative government assumes operating and capital costs of \$70 billion over a 60-year period -- far more costly than California's project -- but calculates the project more than paying for itself. It's a calculation that has been made over and over again, around the world, in both conservative and liberal governments.

But in America our consensus on infrastructure is breaking down. During the earliest years of our nation, the battle over infrastructure helped jump-start partisan divisions. The Federalist Party -- created by Alexander Hamilton -- supported federal funding and support for "internal improvements," which today we know as infrastructure. The Democratic Republicans -- created by Thomas Jefferson -- vehemently disagreed. But a bipartisan consensus eventually developed. Republican President Lincoln made construction of the Transcontinental Railroad a national priority -- in the middle of fighting the Civil War. Republican President Dwight Eisenhower approved what may be the largest infrastructure project in human history -- the Interstate Highway System.

Unfortunately partisanship has returned and the rhetoric has become sensational.

For example, the Reason Foundation suggests that China's high-speed rail system is a testament to why America should not pursue our own system. The Foundation points to a system plagued by cost overruns, corruption and shoddy construction. They fail to mention that the communist dictatorship's lack of transparency may be the primary factor behind those failings. Instead, they sell it as a problem inherent to high-speed rail.

The Cato Institute presents a false claim that efforts to shift passengers from airlines to high-

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speed rail in Europe "have failed over the past dozen years, despite massive government subsidies." Contrary to Cato's assertions, the Public Interest Research Group reports that after the introduction of high-speed rail services, the number of airplane passengers went down 50 percent between Paris and London. There are other examples throughout Europe and Asia. If a comparable drop were to occur in California, more than 1 million fewer passengers would fly between San Francisco and Los Angeles and 400,000 fewer would fly between Los Angeles and Sacramento. And instead of arriving at Sacramento's airport, these former airline passengers would arrive at Sacramento's new downtown rail station, invigorating downtown businesses, restaurants, and retail areas.

The rail system would also have a beneficial impact on congestion along some highways. In Sweden, where high-speed rail was introduced as a commuting option, some corridors saw the percentage of commuters using cars fall from 90 percent to 65 percent.

Along Highway 99, high-speed rail could cut the commute time between Modesto and Sacramento by more than half. As one can imagine, cutting the commute time in half introduces fundamental change. The magnitude of that change is difficult to project, leading to varying ridership forecasts.

Dueling ridership forecasts in a political arena heated by cultural antagonism makes it difficult to assess costs and benefits. As a result, some say it's better to delay the project, or for Californians to drop high-speed rail altogether. Those with a need to generate readership, or wish to get noticed for a statewide run for office, purposefully craft the environment that creates that frustration.

Framing specious arguments against high-speed rail as a cultural issue drives a level of distrust that allows shoddy research and uninformed opinion to color perceptions. Californians should fight against being used to score political points when the state's economic future is on the line.

Grisby, a former staffer and senate fellow in the state Legislature, is deputy policy director for Reconnecting America, a Washington-based think tank.

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WilliamS

Just how much money do you think is around to pay for nice to haves like high speed passenger rail?

California is dumping criminals on the street because there isn't enough money for prisons.

Forget culture wars, the state is BROKE. You have already spent our kids' money.

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vade_dyset

It's about time for the media to look more closely at the role of the airline industry in preventing the development of high-speed rail in the US.

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