

Opinion & Analysis

Extremists unite in irrational reaction to EU



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Lisbon Treaty deserves the support of all those who care about the environment and our children's future

NAZIS, NAZIS everywhere. Last month this column reported on how US president Barack Obama was being painted as being the very worst kind of right-wing thug – by, well, actual right-wing thugs. It may come as a surprise to discover that the other great neo-Nazi movement in our midst is the European Union.

This disclosure comes courtesy of an anti-Lisbon freesheet called *Sovereign Independent*, picked up in a convenience shop in Dún Laoghaire. The (unnamed) organisation behind it warns that EU flags are “popping up like swastikas”. Elsewhere, we read: “Some might scoff at a future EU dictator in the same way that the Germans scoffed at a Nazi Germany in the 1920s.”

This organ (www.sovereignindependent.com) doesn't say much about itself, but contact information suggests it is run from somewhere in the northwest.

The notion of labelling as fascist the very institutions that arose from the ruins of European nationalistic totalitarianism and succeeded in securing peace, prosperity and political unity for over half a century is grotesque. Things get a lot clearer on a UK website promoted by *Sovereign Independent* – www.ukcolumn.org. It features a picture of Obama, retouched with a Hitler-style moustache and captioned: “Assassinate!”

Hatred is almost always irrational, and the EU seems to provoke equally irrational reactions from both ends of the political spectrum. Some environmentalists oppose Lisbon on the grounds that the union is all about promoting big corporations, rampant consumerism and globalisation. These charges are not without merit, but recent EU successes in hitting both Intel and Microsoft with billion euro antitrust fines suggest this capitalist poodle also has teeth.

The EU, from its genesis as a purely economic alliance to rebuild war-torn Europe, has evolved into a surprisingly nuanced and nimble environmental player. During the last decade in particular, tackling sustainability and countering habitat loss has gained powerful traction. Almost one-fifth of the EU's land area is now part of a protected network known as Natura 2000.

This movement has borne fruit for Ireland via such instruments as the EU nitrates directive, which aims to curb water pollution from agriculture, to the habitats directive, which prods member states into taking care of sensitive areas, such as bogs, sand dunes and wetlands. Ireland's first report under this directive last year found that just 7 per cent of habitats examined were in good condition.

The EU-backed Burren Life project is Ireland's first major conservation farming

project, an imaginative programme to engage local farmers in safeguarding rather than diminishing a sensitive habitat.

Ironically, while many of our local politicians were scrambling to rezone the entire western seaboard for one-off housing, the bureaucrats in Brussels frequently ended up being the true custodians of our common wealth.

Observing the EU as it nudges and cajoles its more recalcitrant members into compliance with environmental regulations that are in their own best interest is at times like watching a hen patiently trying to get her unruly chicks across the road.

Another bright idea from Europe was the phased introduction from this week of low-energy lighting regulations, which will finally pull the plug on woefully inefficient incandescent bulbs. This one modest measure will immediately reduce carbon emissions and save the public billions in electricity bills.

The EU has also achieved notable successes in regulating and banning harmful substances, such as phthalates and many pesticides, as well as pressing for better energy-efficiency standards in buildings and transport. In many fields, the EU has eclipsed traditional US leadership. Having ridden on the coat-tails of the US since the 1940s, Europe seized its chance for leadership on the

crisis of our age when the US walked away from Kyoto. “Climate change is the singular global agenda where Europe has led the world,” Prof Frank Convery, chairman of Comhar, the sustainable development council said recently. US leadership was, he added, undermined by “a historic departure from respect for science and evidence in favour of . . . decisions based on intuition and quasi-religious inspiration.”

The EU's so called 20-20-20 commitment (20 per cent cuts in emissions, increase in energy efficiency and a 20 per cent share of renewables, all by 2020) is still the best offer on the table.

It has thrown down the gauntlet to the US, China and others: if they are prepared to match the EU, it will up the ante to 30 per cent emissions cuts by 2020. These numbers add up to our best shot at curtailing runaway temperature increases while it's still possible.

Morally, the EU has evolved to be greater than the sum of its parts. It has done much for and asked little of Ireland. The Lisbon Treaty will I believe help perfect that union. It deserves the support of all those who care about the environment and our children's future. Unless, that is, you seriously believe our interests would be better protected by Cóir, Youth Defence or the fine men and women behind *Sovereign Independent*?