

A Europe free from discrimination

by Richard Corbett MEP

In the EU we are all a minority of some sort.

The European Year Against Racism provided us all with an opportunity, not just to root out racists and oppose racist propaganda, but also to analyse the conditions which give rise to racism and which enable racist propaganda to fall on fertile ground.

In itself, of course, European Year Against Racism was merely the belated recognition on the part of the European Union that it, too, must play a part in combating racism. It is perhaps surprising that the European Union, the origins of which lie in the anti-fascist resistance movements of the Second World War, and whose *raison d'être* is promoting unity in diversity, has not been active from the beginning on this issue. No single nationality, no single religious group and no single language constitutes a majority of the population. These are facts upon which the Union should have built years ago to develop a coherent anti-racist strategy.

However, as we know, historically the Union developed initially through the creation of a common market and an economic community, leaving political issues aside. It was only in the 1980s, when faced with the rise of racist and fascist parties in a number of European countries - sometimes reaching over 10% of the vote - that the EU began to take action.

Action is certainly required at EU level to complement actions taken at national level and also to stimulate those countries which are lagging behind in the fight against racism to take stronger actions at national level. In terms of EU legislation, for example, it is important to ensure that EU wide laws prevent racist groups from circumventing national laws against racial incitement merely by publishing their offensive material in a state with less stringent rules. It is important to keep up with technological developments in this respect: the use of the Internet by racist groups in order to evade legislation requires an international response.

A new provision in the Treaty of Amsterdam agreed in 1998 by the EU member states is also important in that it gave the EU the right, for the first time, to adopt anti-discrimination legislation applicable across Europe.

It is not just new techniques of spreading racist propaganda that are being used, but new types of racist message. Take for example, the anti-Islamic propaganda and the portrayal of Islam in much of our popular press. Islam is presented as an evil, extremist religion, threatening our own culture. Yet to judge Islam on the basis of the acts of a few fundamentalists would be the same as judging Christianity on the basis of the Spanish Inquisition!

In fact, too few people in Europe realise how much Islam is part of European culture. The great Greek classics, so often quoted as being the origin of European culture, only survived through the work of the great Islamic universities when Europe went through the dark ages. And our mathematics – the foundation of our technological society – was developed in no small part by the Arabs who gave us, among other things, our system of numbers and our algebra – itself an Arabic word.

This illustrates a wider point – that all our cultures have drawn upon each other. In Britain, our English language has Germanic roots based on the Anglo Saxons and the Danish Viking settlements as well as Latin origins through the early French brought by the Norman invasions. Our eating habits draw upon the novel foods brought back from the New World (potatoes, tomatoes, maize). Our drink likewise: what is more English than a cup of tea? Yet tea comes from China and became a big thing in England only at the beginning of the last century. Beer originated in Egypt and wine was spread across Europe by the Romans. Much of the classical music we

listen to comes from Germany and Central Europe (Mozart, Handel, Beethoven, Liszt, Schubert, Haydn etc). Our popular music is of universal diversity. No aspect of our culture is unaffected by others.

We should never forget that multiculturalism refers not only to the plurality of cultures but also to the pluralistic origins of every given culture.

In being part of a wider Union, however, we all have the potential to learn from its cultural diversity. It helps us to see that there is no such thing as a "national" culture but hundreds of variations and permutations of innumerable cultural characteristics. This wonderful diversity is an asset to be cherished. We all have a duty to fight the racist cancer that seeks to destroy our multicultural heritage.