# British wine trade urged to be 'whiter than white'

13 Oct 2006 by JR

At this year's annual Wine & Spirit Education Trust lecture, Christopher Carson, former chairman of Constellation Europe and chairman of The Wine and Spirit Trade Association, challenged the trade to **Face the Future—Now**. The challenge was not about innovation, pricing, promotion, oversupply or the premium wine market. The challenge was to embrace social responsibility as a part of your business culture. Here is a synopsis of his hard-hitting talk to the UK wine and spirit trade made by Jeremy Beadles of the Wine & Spirit Association.

*Alcohol plays an important part in knitting together the social fabric of the UK and there are many positive health benefits from moderate alcohol consumption which get lost in the search for circulation-grabbing headlines. There is little balance to the current debate about alcohol and negative headlines, including phrases like 'binge drinking' and 'alcohol fuelled', sell newspapers; they also influence public opinion and drive politicians. The drinks' industry is an easy scapegoat and, as with other health issues such as smoking and obesity, the government is looking for the industry to solve its problems. The problem is people drinking too much, getting drunk and then behaving in an antisocial manner. But this is a cultural issue and not just an industry problem and, therefore, although the industry does have a part to play in ensuring that it behaves in a responsible fashion, so does the government.*

*The alcohol drinks' industry is an important driver of the economy. Consumers spend £40.8 billion, 5.6% of total expenditure, on alcoholic drinks. This contributes £14 billion to the exchequer each year. Over 5% of the whole working population, 14.5 million people, are employed in the UK alcohol drinks' trades and associated trades—those are the positive figures. The less positive side to alcohol is the cost to society which the government estimates at £20 billion per year, including 1.2 million violent incidents per year, 30,000 hospital admissions due to alcohol dependence and 70% of all admissions to A&E are alcohol connected. Only seven people per year die of allergic reactions to peanuts but the 'may contain nuts' reference has become more than commonplace. In comparison, alcohol accounts for 22,000 deaths per year against tobacco at 106,000 deaths per year and obesity at 9,000 deaths per year.*

*The government is actively legislating on a whole raft of health and social order issues at the moment, and in particular alcohol, foods and tobacco issues. Their initial approach is to seek industry action but if change can't be agreed, or is too slow, then they are more than prepared to look at legislative alternatives. If the industry won't self-regulate they will regulate us. With more proposed regulation in the pipeline it is essential that the industry work with the government to help create policy and legislation which industry can administer easily.*

*The government is responding to pressure from the media and the political imperative is to be seen to be doing something whilst avoiding the 'nanny state' tag. However, the media are not always whiter than white. In the Daily Mail two weeks ago there were two anti-alcohol articles which discussed changes in the law to ban advertising of alcoholic products and discount promotions. In the same issue there were three full-page advertisements offering 25 to 33% discounts and, of course, BOGOFS [buy one, get one free – a Carson favourite at one time - JR]. The public understands emotive headlines and they want city centre violence and binge drinking dealt with, but how many people believe they drink irresponsibly? It does not take much to be a government-accredited 'binge drinker'—you just need to consume twice the recommended daily alcohol limit once in a week, that is three pints of 5% abv beer for men or two x 175ml glasses of 14% abv wine for women in one evening.*

*In looking to the future and trying to understand how public policy on alcohol might develop, it is helpful to look at the*

*tobacco industry. Although there are some considerable differences between tobacco and alcohol (especially with regard to the positive health benefits of moderate consumption of alcohol), it is useful as a comparison given that tobacco-caused illnesses cost the National Health Service £1.7 billion last year and so did alcohol-caused illnesses. If you can remember back to the days when tobacco advertising was allowed, we were told it was cool to smoke, but since 1965 onwards, when TV ads were banned, there have been new restrictions on tobacco on a nearly annual basis, including health warnings and restrictions on sports' sponsorship, banning of all advertising, and of course most recently the ban on smoking in public places. Between 1996 and 2006 the Department of Health spent £96.6 million on advertising the dangers of smoking.*

*The current media clamour on alcohol is backed by government statistics which demonstrate that, not only are people drinking more (and particularly women), but consumption patterns have also changed and people tend to drink more on one big night out a week. As the government seeks the industry's support in tackling the social and health consequences of excessive alcohol consumption, it is important for the alcohol drinks' industry to stick together. Every time there is a split between the on-trade and the off-trade or between beers, wines and spirits, the government wins. The current priorities for the industry are reducing the levels of underage sales, promoting alcohol education, informing consumers about alcohol levels through unit labelling and sensible drinking messages.*

*What are the consequences of ignoring these warnings?*

- *No advertising on alcohol;*
- *No sponsorship of sporting events for under 18s;*
- *Reduction of alcohol levels for under 25 year-old drivers;*
- *Change the age of consent to 21 for the purchase of alcohol;*
- *Health warnings on alcohol packaging;*
- *Differential taxation of alcohol;*
- *Tougher laws for licensees;*
- *Sectioning off the alcohol aisle in supermarkets.*

*These are just some of the suggestions made by politicians, health professionals and the media over the last month.*

*So what should individual businesses be doing? The industry needs to unite and it needs to work with the government. It needs to deliver on its side of the bargain and sell and market responsibly. The industry needs to be whiter than white so that we can defend our case and manage our future. You should be adhering to the requirements of the Social Responsibility Standards for the Production and Sale of Alcoholic Drinks in the UK, and to do that you must understand what is meant by sensible drinking. Will unit-labelling reduce town centre violence on a Saturday night? No, it is only one small element of what must be a long-term strategy and the key solution must be education. If people aren't informed they won't take personal responsibility and legislation / taxation / businesses acting responsibly will only have partial impact. Anti-alcohol advocates will always advocate labelling, taxation and banning, but that doesn't take account of the fact that many people consume alcohol in moderation and don't have a problem.*

*The drinks' industry needs to work together and to back the newly established Drinkaware Trust and The Wine and Spirit Trade Association. The role of the WSTA on social responsibility issues is to provide the best trading environment for its members by ensuring that it leads on industry solutions and initiatives so as to avoid further government intervention by regulation and taxation. It should also provide simple tools for the members to work on the social responsibility agenda and demonstrate best practice to government.*

*This year has seen some big steps forward by the industry:*

- *The concerted 'Challenge 21'campaign to address underage sales;*
- *The launch of the Industry Social Responsibility standards with 16 other trade associations;*
- *The development of the European Wine Strategy for responsible consumption.*

*But this is just the start of the work and it is time to face the future now. We must all be alert to the dangers to our businesses, stop thinking about social responsibility as a chore or a cost, and start thinking about it as a business opportunity. We must unite through associations such as the WSTA and Drinkaware Trust. We must work with government and not against it because the industry should be vigorously committed to preventing alcohol misuse and because, in fact, it is good for the business and industry, and public health concerns can be constructively bought together to share a common purpose. Millions of adults responsibly enjoy beer, wine and spirits as part of celebrating social, family and community occasions, and alcohol can be part of a balanced lifestyle-choice when consumed in moderation.*