

»» *Are the French on their way
to Prohibition?* ««

EDITORIAL

BY JOEL B. PAYNE

Shortly before Christmas a court in Paris fined its local newspaper, *Le Parisien*, €5,000 for breaking a French advertising law. The judgment followed a complaint lodged by the National Association for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Addiction (ANPAA), an anti-alcohol body with a €66.5m annual budget, partially subsidised by the state.

Why the uproar? The newspaper was not condemned for an advertisement, but for an article published in 2005 that made recommendations on Champagne. Acknowledging the rhetoric of the lobby, the judge ruled that the editorial was “intended to promote sales of alcoholic beverages in exercising a psychological effect that incited the reader to buy alcohol.” As such, under French law, it must be regarded as advertising and accompanied by a disclaimer that alcohol abuse is dangerous to health.

You really wonder at the attitude of the French authorities who, on the one hand, are pouring countless millions of euros of taxpayer’s money into the production of appalling wine that no one wants to drink and yet take such a hostile attitude to Champagne.

Shortly thereafter, another French court ruled that Heineken had to remove all advertising from its French website or face fines of €3,000 per day. The two rulings are nothing short of an attack on free speech, with far reaching implications for all journalists, not just those in France: Will film, theatre and travel columns eventually be forced to carry warnings as well? Will movies portraying people enjoying wine have to be censored? Or at least rated ‘X’ so that no minor need witness the obscenities?

The 1991 Evin Law, one of the strictest in Europe, is considered by French winemakers to be a major factor in the decline of domestic wine sales. Further, it is clear that France’s ANPAA would like to see this ruling set a precedent – and not only in France. There are already Prohibition voices that wish to have legislation similar to France’s Evin Law enacted across the European Union.

In this light, it is not only a French matter - and not only a wine matter. If this interpretation were to be maintained, it would open the gate for other infringements of the freedom of the press. Should not articles about cars be accompanied by a message on the dangers of driving? Articles on food by messages about obesity? Where does it stop?

France had and still has a major alcohol problem. Interestingly, though, as wine consumption has fallen two thirds from its annual high of 150 litres per head, the number of alcoholics has remained the same. It would appear to a sane observer that education and social support would be a better way to confront the problem. In this, though, despotism is again raising its ugly head in unforeseen places. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

