

September 2009

Speech by Hugh Johnson in Urziger Würzgarten

We meet on a sunny September evening in one of the world's most beautiful and prestigious vineyards. 150 metres below us, glimpsed through trim green rows of vines, the river Mosel winds on its way from Bernkastel to Traben Trarbach.

Immediately overhead, if the folly of the government is not checked, the sky will soon be blocked out by a motorway on stilts 160 metres high. The purpose of this motorway? To connect a road with very little traffic to an airport that loses money. Hahn airport in the Hunsrück has only one user: Ryanair, the carrier that has to give free flights to get customers, and has a long track-record of blackmailing the owners of the airports it uses, and frequently abandoning them.

I came here today, I must tell you, from a holiday with my grandchildren in the South of France, at my own expense, because I am shocked and revolted that such a scheme could reach this stage, and I fear that the growers of the world's finest Rieslings, in sites uniquely apt for this great grape, are too discouraged to fight for their inheritance.

I heard of the high Mosel bridge plan so long ago that I had forgotten it. Politicians often try on stupid schemes. When I heard it was revived I was incredulous. I have long experience of the German government's mishandling of wine legislation. I was here in 1971 and saw the catastrophe of the laws which almost wrecked your ancient industry. But I never expected to see its vandalism take such physical form as a viaduct over its most precious and prestigious Riesling vineyards.

Others will question the spending of hundreds of millions of taxpayers' money on a road without traffic leading to a remote airport whose sole tenant is a legend for crude and cynical commercialization.

The world is aware that unsustainable industry and damaging transport systems are the fantasies of a generation ago. Politicians have not woken up. Rheinland Pfalz thought it could take advantage of the detritus of WW II at the old U.S. airbase at the Hahn. Those who say these things can't be stopped should look at Stansted, Ryanair's other base. After 20 years of planning and 3 public enquiries, the threat of an extra runway has evaporated. Recession and global warming have changed everybody's attitudes except that of the government of Rheinland Pfalz.

Let me mention another point: the fantasy that a viaduct would bring tourists. Do aircraft overhead bring tourists by parachute? Instead, the noise of traffic overhead will haunt your days and nights. You will never be free of it.

But what I really need to say is about this historic landscape, this unique culture, the craftsmanship that over a thousand years has interpreted mountain slopes as beautiful flavours in wines that are sought after round the world.

Perhaps you are too close to it to see it. The past 40 years have not been kind to the Mosel. As a border region it is marginalized beside the thriving Pfalz and Rheinhessen. I can tell you, from London, that the whole world has nothing comparable to Mosel Riesling. The New World can challenge, even start to reproduce, Bordeaux, Burgundy, the Pfalz and Rheingau. Not the Mosel. As over-alcoholic heavy wines go out of fashion the unique lightness-with-intensity of the Mosel has an opportunity never known before – made easier, I admit, by global warming.

Do you know what a treasure this inheritance is? I am not talking about nostalgia and middle-aged tourists. The future is always with the young, the enthusiasts who go back up abandoned vineyards to cultivate their dreams. Explain these dreams, cultivate these vines and tell the world, and the Mosel can claim greatness again.

This is what your politicians should be doing: helping what is unique about this land and people, the work of centuries that is still fragile, that needs promoting and explaining to the world. Instead of preparing it for a bright future they pollute and betray their own country. The Mosel High Bridge is more than a folly. It is a crime. The example of Dresden is too obvious to miss. UNESCO has cancelled its World Heritage status because its government built a bridge too far. Look at the land before you. Now picture it with the crushing banality of a road on concrete stilts.

You must fight.