

Reflections on living in France during the Covid 19 pandemic - Tuesday 15th December 2020 : what a topsy-turvy year this has been. Five months since my last newsletter on 21st July, France is today coming out of its second lockdown even as London & some Home Counties are raised into tier 3 and Germany & the Netherlands are on the brink of new lockdowns.

Over here the second lockdown was imposed on 30th October as the number of new cases escalated and intensive care rooms in hospitals were beginning to feel the strain. Unlike the first wave three month lockdown from 17th March to total easing on 15th June, the new restrictions created a reduced level of lockdown applicable nationwide in order to keep the economy running. In all it lasted 6 weeks. Imposing a national lockdown during the second wave rather than treating the country on a region by region basis during the first wave was justified by the fact that the virus is now running rampant throughout the country rather than before when it tended to spread itself more in areas of high population density. The general movement of the population as people went on summer holiday helped spread the virus which has now come back in force as ambient temperatures drop providing ideal conditions for catching it.

To maintain some economic activity during the second lockdown, professionals were allowed to travel on work related business provided they carried the necessary form signed by their employer. Working from home was again obligatory for most people but schools stayed open. The general public though was only allowed out for recreation and essential shopping for one hour a day provided they remained within a one km radius of their homes.

Supermarkets and food shops stayed open but were required to close off shelves selling non-essential items so as not to give them any commercial advantage over ordinary shops which were required to close. This led to quite surreal scenes in supermarkets as they interpreted these regulations. Bars and restaurants were once again closed but other hospitality venues were allowed to stay open but with stringent restrictions on numbers of people and circulation. Hotels were allowed to stay open but only for business travellers.

During his latest televised address to the Nation on 26th November, President Macron admitted these regulations had not proved sufficiently effective and new C-19 cases were still rampant with an unacceptably high R reproduction value requiring a modification to his previous forecast.

Lockdown therefore continued but with progressively less constraints from 28th November as new measures were introduced. Religious buildings were allowed to open again for a limited attendance along with libraries, bookshops and archives but other hospitality venues were ordered to close. Non-essential shops were allowed to re-open up to 9pm, in response to public pressure in the run up to Christmas. A 20km radius from home with a three hour time limit for exercise and recreation was introduced rather than the previous 1km for one hour.

From today, we are allowed once again to travel freely without certificates but bars and restaurants are still required to remain closed until 20th January 2021 except for takeaway though many restaurants are now offering meal delivery as an alternative service which is allowed. *Uber Eats* is doing good business. Other hospitality venues will be reappraised on 7th January 2021 to see if conditions then are suitable to allow them to re-open.

From an individual perspective, these lockdowns seem very similar to retirement but without the travel. Of course face masks have to be worn when in crowded places and a signed & dated form had to be carried at all times even for a trip to the local shops but no-one has ever checked mine. From today that latter condition is now relaxed.

In his weekly public update last Thursday 10th December, the Prime Minister, Jean Castex, noted that new daily cases of C-19 were still around the 14 000 mark down from +50 000 in early November though still far in excess of the less than 5 000 criteria initially proposed by Mr Macron as the benchmark for lifting lockdown. Nevertheless the R value was significantly reduced and the tendency for new cases was in a downward projection so the 15th December deadline for lifting lockdown was maintained. This realignment of the goalposts was no doubt politically motivated in order to keep the public onside as national patience is beginning to wear thin especially in rural areas where the direct effects of the pandemic are less widely prevalent due to the absence of people.

Nevertheless, as noted above, the virus is circulating everywhere and the hospitals in rural regions are taking up the slack from the more densely populated urban areas. By coincidence, the latest daily figure from yesterday, 14th December, was only 3 063 new cases, a drop of 73.4% but this was a Monday figure which is usually lower because the weekend totals never appear until the Tuesday. The real overnight figures are in the 10K range, so double Mr Macron's proposal. By comparison, 203 new patients were admitted overnight into intensive care, an increase of 134.8% equivalent to a 6.1% positivity rate.

The Government's strategy remains based on the science and the statistics rather than public opinion but some leeway is inevitable and derogations apply on a case by case basis. For instance, following an outcry, religious services are now permitted but other hospitality venues (theatres, cinemas, museums, chateaux, monuments, sports stadia, etc) will remain closed until 7th January. Bars and restaurants having to remain closed until 20th January is also an extremely unpopular restriction. The logic for these decisions is based on the circulation pinch points when entering and leaving but most public building operators have ridiculed this logic maintaining they have invested significantly to ensure they can cope adequately to avoid such issues.

Internal EU borders remain open for free circulation within Europe but international borders remain closed except for business travel and French nationals returning home. In all cases, proof of a negative C-19 test taken within the previous 72 hours is required to enter into France though these can be obtained at the port of arrival.

To curb the excesses of this new relative freedom of movement which allows the general public to travel nationwide again, a nightly curfew between 8pm and 6am has been imposed until 20th January 2021. This includes New Year's Eve but excludes Christmas Eve which is the traditional time for the festive meal though this year family reunions will be limited to a maximum of six adults per household. Knowing that most French people will do what they think best anyway, the Government has emphasised individual responsibility and noted that extra police will be out and about to enforce the curfew and impose fines on those people flouting the regulations.

It would be difficult to imagine the police invading someone's private home to check up on numbers around the dinner table but recent film of rave parties attracting several thousand young people blatantly flouting all sanitary precautions are obviously being stamped upon, in particular the organisers who face sizeable fines and possible imprisonment. Nevertheless, it is clear the country is braced for a new surge of cases after Christmas & New Year as has been seen to be the case in the US following Thanksgiving. A potential third phase peak of C-19 cases.

It would be fair to say that most French people are now quite confused as to what they can and cannot do but the Government website includes copious notes about this with extensive replies printed to the most commonly asked questions. It also points out this is an unprecedented health situation which remains extremely volatile with restrictions liable to change almost on a daily basis. As in UK, extensive financial aid is being made available to compensate companies which are not being allowed to operate as normal but inevitably it is expected many may not survive the draconian measures being imposed.

Saturation publicity in the media continues to advise us to strictly respect the basic sanitary precautions such as masking, socially distancing, washing hands and avoiding crowds. However, reports & photos of mass rave parties and crowded shops indicate that many people have other priorities. The right to demonstrate is part of the French dna and every weekend violent scenes of civil unrest are shown on TV as the police employ sometimes excessive crowd control techniques to maintain order. This is obviously the less desirable effect of these unprecedented measures currently in force though in terms of actual numbers, they represent a miniscule percentage of the law abiding public who are doing their best to avoid becoming infected.

After some disastrous recent police brutality evidence, it is interesting to note that they are now using a lot of real time filming to identify the troublemakers who inevitably mix with law abiding demonstrators, known in French as "*les casseurs*" and targeting these individuals in spear attacks before they can create trouble. The best advice though is to steer clear of any type of demonstration at this particularly sensitive time. From that perspective, to avoid more trouble than necessary, the Government has tried hard to maintain its critical dates albeit with slightly realigned restrictions. Commentators suggest that the media refer to the police as peace keepers rather than law enforcers which is seen as a more pugilistic and provocative description.

The France figures for Covid-19 up to the end of today (15th December 2020) are as follows :

- total confirmed cases : 2 379 915 (increase of 2.2 million since 21st July / +1242%)
- total cumulative deaths : 58 282 (increase of 28 thousand since 21st July / +93%)

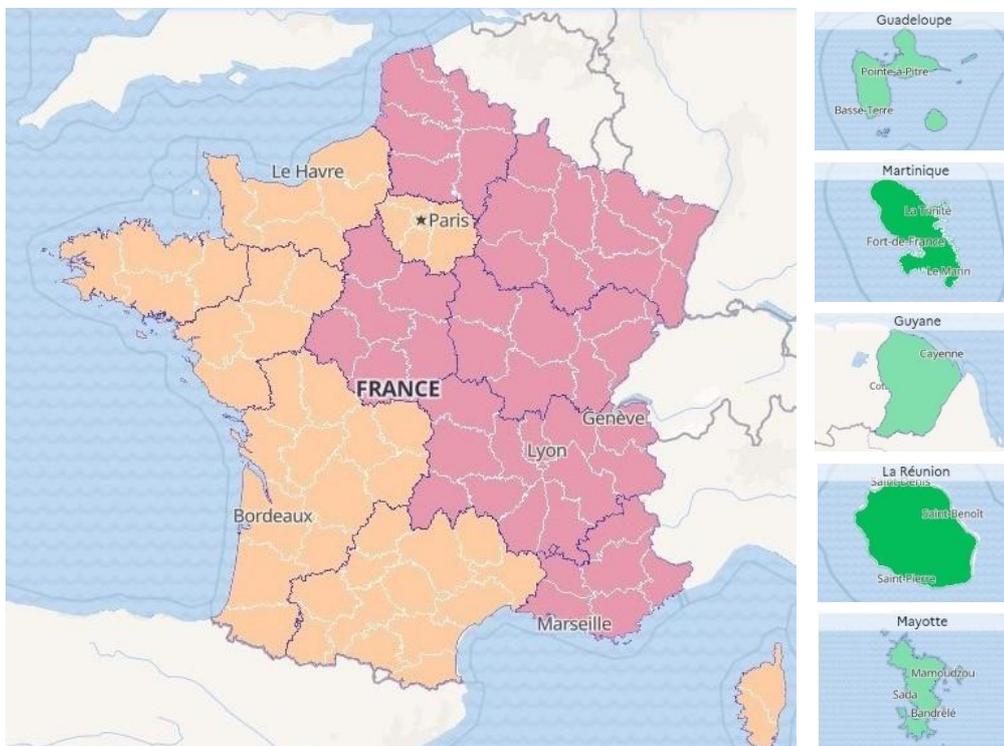
In hospitals :

- hospitalised : 25 481
- new patients hospitalised : 1 316
- returned home : 177 647
- in intensive care : 2 906
- new patients in intensive care : 209
- died in hospital : 40 346

In care homes & elsewhere :

- confirmed cases : 129 501
- died : 17 936

Source 15.12.20 : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>



Intensive care beds occupation rate (red = critical / orange = nearly full / green = availability)



Intensive care beds occupation rate (first peak 7.04.20 @ 139% / second peak 12.11.20 @ 97% / currently @ 57%)



Mortality rate second peak 2.11.20 @ 501 / low on 4.12.20 @ 107 / currently @ 118)



R value reproduction rate (peak 21.08.20 @ 1.49 / subsequent peak 22.10.20 @ 1.47 / currently @ 0.83 & rising)

These various diagrams and graphs from the Government website indicate the recent trends for the second phase, in particular the critical shortage of intensive care beds in the north-east, east, centre and south-east of France coloured red. In the rest of France coloured orange including in and around Paris, the situation is fairly full but manageable. In the overseas territories indicated in green, the situation is currently well under control. Nationally, at the moment (graph n° 1), 57% of intensive care beds are occupied in mainland France which is well above the normal rate but far less than at the peak of the first phase back in April when occupation rate at 139% of capacity was critical and intensive care patients had to be evacuated elsewhere.

As reported then, France was sending these patients by plane and train to neighbouring countries where there was available capacity. Now, the situation in Germany and Austria is worse than in France. Graph n° 2 shows clearly why the Government decided on a second lockdown on 30th October as the average daily mortality rate rose dramatically to a peak on 2nd November but slumped again just as quickly. Worryingly after a low on 4th December, this is now rising again. This corresponds to the R reproduction rate illustrated in graph n° 3 which shows several peaks in August & October just below 1.5 dropping to a low on 20th November at 0.6 but rising again rapidly to its current level of 0.83. It remains to be seen how the relaxation of lockdown today will affect these figures hence the importance of imposing a nightly curfew in an effort to prevent socialising and partying in the run-up to Christmas and New Year.

The French vaccination programme was dealt a blow last week when one of the French laboratories, Sanofi, announced its vaccine would not be ready until the latter part of 2021. The media revealed that the Sanofi vaccine uses the recombinant protein technique. It is a protein produced by a cell whose genome has been transformed by genetic recombination. This explanation is rather lost on me since this is far from my speciality but I gather the technique is different from other laboratories.

However the Government has declared alternative supply lines including Pfizer-BioNtech, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and CureVac so similar to UK in that respect. We are not expecting such a quick start-up for C-19 vaccination as is currently the situation in UK. The latest news today is that EU countries will adopt a unified vaccination programme and we await to hear when it will launch probably during January 2021 according to the latest Government information. The programme will follow a similar order of beneficiaries as in UK (that is the elderly and health workers first, etc). We don't expect to be called up until probably the spring.

France has budgeted 1.5 billion Euros for the programme which will be free to all citizens and require two injections at several weeks apart. 200 million doses have been ordered allowing up to 100 million people to be vaccinated, but resources will be pooled across the EU so any reserve

will be shared with our neighbours. It is not yet decided whether it will be compulsory.



The French satirical press had its own amusing take on the UK's vaccination launch, as shown here. I will leave the reader to imagine the possible identity of the patient. The play on words of the reflexive verb "se piquer" translates as "to inject oneself".

I was interested to learn about the source of some of the vaccines which apparently comes from monkey stool. Why someone would think to look at this as a possible cure is beyond me but leads one to think that someone somewhere is now mass farming excrement from monkeys. An awful lot of it will be

required to provide vaccine for the world. If this is all true, it is somewhat ironic to think that monkeys might be saviours of mankind, not what the “*Planet of the Apes*” authors had in mind.

As an ex-project manager, the logistics of this roll out intrigues me, especially in the manufacture, transportation and storage of such vast quantities then its distribution to the treatment point, necessary dilution to room temperature with a saline solution before sticking it into the patient’s arm. Trying to inject a liquid at -70°C would at the least be uncomfortable for the recipient, though at this temperature, I assume the product is a solid.

Other French news during the last five months has been secondary in the face of the C-19 pandemic which has formed the bulk of broadcasts and typeface apart from some election somewhere on the 3rd November which has rumbled on ever since. Brexit is of minor relevance to the French public since it is supposedly being dealt with in Brussels and if you believe what you read, direct discussion between individual Heads of State has been refused by the EU. Though it was widely reported that Mr Macron threatened he would veto any deal with which he didn’t agree so apparently he is taking a close interest. The rest of the population appears to be more interested in the TV shows “*La France a un incroyable talent*” and “*Maître Chef*”.

The rare broadcasts about Brexit tend to focus on interviews with Kent residents and the hardships they will experience in the face of no-deal (emergency lorry parks at disused airfields, traffic jams on the M20, subsequent air pollution due to idling diesel engines, general collapse of the local economy, and so on). In other words, leading the French listener to believe that the gung-ho British Government is leading their impoverished population like lemmings over the white cliffs of Dover in some inexplicable attempt to prove a point whilst at the same time trying to usurp their French counterparts from their unalienable right to go fishing where the fish live.

In this latter respect, they have a good point as many English fishermen sold their fishing quotas to the French back in the Thatcher days so the French have already paid handsomely to fish in British territorial waters anyway. As I shop in my superb local food market, it is best not to mention the wretched British trawler men who brazenly come over during the off season to wipe out the scallop fields in the *Baie du Mont St Michel* when French law forbids the locals from fishing there. No-one in France, least of all the many Brits who live here, can understand why any sane government would throw away a free trade agreement in favour of one which requires payment of tariffs, UK must be the only country in the world which thinks this is a good idea.

On a more positive note, being able to watch some professional sport on TV is a welcome distraction, albeit generally behind closed doors. The three week *Tour de France* cycling race was an outstanding success taking place in September two months later than usual. As interesting was the *Giro d’Italia*, the three week cycling tour of Italy which finished in early November. The latter stages up and down the Southern Alps had to contend with snow and ice which spiced up the spectacle. The two leading riders less than a second apart after the penultimate stage of a Grand Tour was unprecedented resulting in a tense final day time trial through Milan and a new British victor. Other major sporting events such as the Tokyo Olympics and Euro 2020 football competition became victims of the pandemic and have been deferred until 2021.

Finally a word about the C-19 situation across Europe. Germany is about to introduce a new lockdown which will continue during Christmas until 10th January 2021 at least. Christmas shopping has been blamed for the increase in social contact leading to an unprecedented rise in the number of infections. Non-essential shops and schools will also have to close whilst bars and restaurants will remain closed. Some relaxation of the strict rules will be allowed over Christmas to allow very limited meetings for close family members to reunite briefly.

The Netherlands will also reintroduce a lockdown with similar measures to Germany and people have been advised against booking trips abroad until at least the middle of March. Italy is also suffering from a high daily death toll once more and the Italian Government is considering imposing restrictions again.

The global situation due to C-19 is now 71.6 million confirmed cases resulting in more than 1.6 million deaths. The latest figures can be obtained from the World Health Organisation website at <https://covid19.who.int/> which provides comparative figures for all affected countries. USA continues to top the list with over 16 million confirmed cases resulting in almost 300K deaths. The current figures dwarf the previously reported figures just five months ago.

As in the previous briefings, the summary of the five major European economies worst affected, showing population, confirmed Covid-19 cases, deaths due to Covid-19, percentage of deaths compared to confirmed cases, number of deaths per hundred thousand of the population, listed in order from the highest to the lowest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19, are :

- France : 65.8 million / 2 338 726 cases / 57 910 deaths / 2.48% / 88 deaths per 100K
- UK : 66.7 million / 1 869 670 cases / 64 402 deaths / 3.44% / 97 deaths per 100K
- Italy : 60.0 million / 1 855 737 cases / 65 011 deaths / 3.50% / 108 deaths per 100K
- Spain : 45.7 million / 1 751 884 cases / 48 013 deaths / 2.74% / 105 deaths per 100K
- Germany : 81.5 million / 1 351 510 cases / 22 475 deaths / 1.66% / 28 deaths per 100K

Whilst WHO figures differ slightly from the French Government figures, this analysis now puts France at the top of the list for the highest number of confirmed cases though there are a greater number of resulting deaths in both Italy & UK. Inspection of the various graphs associated with each country's figures on the WHO website illustrates that the number of new daily cases has dramatically increased during the current second wave in the autumn and beginning of winter and has lasted for a longer period compared to the first wave in the spring.

This is probably due to the extensive programmes of testing everywhere. In France 29.2 million tests have been carried out of which 2.2 million provided positive results, about 8%. Most positive cases do not have any significant ill effects and following a mandatory period of isolation to prevent asymptomatic people from inadvertently passing it on, are deemed to be fully recovered. This is shown by the large fall in the percentage of deaths compared to confirmed cases since 5 months ago. Nevertheless, the number of deaths per 100K of population is inexorably rising in particular in Germany where the death toll now greatly exceeds that of their first wave and Italy where the new death toll has reached the same level as before.

Everywhere the figures are alarming with Italy having the highest death toll at 108 per 100K of population though France remains the country with the highest number of confirmed cases with more than 2.3 million. It would seem that only a vaccine will eradicate the problem completely but news that the virus is mutating into a new strain is also worrying. More than ever, we need to depend on the experts and scientists for their good advice and continued research and it is beneficial for all if politicians heed their advice so as to make the best decisions. The problem appears to be in persuading everybody to take the evidence seriously and respect the regulations for the greater good of others even if they are less bothered for themselves.

The conclusion to be drawn is somewhat depressing but we shall prevail. Zoom and google have become indispensable tools to keep in touch with nearest and dearest and I have attended as many online technical conferences and social reunions in the last six months as I ever attended in person during the last six years. This easier access to content and people is beneficial and the organisers are to be congratulated for bringing two excellent IESF lectures into our homes this autumn. The carol service and social gatherings are the icing on the Christmas cake.

Whatever happens with the deal, travel to France next year will be more complicated. To this end, I have taken my own precautions as have many of my compatriots who live here. During all the trauma of 2020, France found time to grant me my French nationality terminating an 18 month instruction process which began in early 2019 with submission of a thick file of some 50 documents to justify my application. I was offered nationality as a formality at my wedding here 32+ years ago but declined for fear of being drafted for military service amongst other reasons. That particular loophole was closed in the 1990s because so many marriages were being arranged as financial scams precisely to obtain French nationality then terminated afterwards.

I had to smile though, I was told at one Prefecture interview that British applications were being fast tracked to ensure they were completed before new Brexit regulations came into force at the end of 2020 when all British residency permits will require renewal. Goodness knows how long non British applicants have to wait. At least I can celebrate this New Year safe in the knowledge that I shall no longer need to queue at 6am in the morning to gain access into the bowels of some dingy administration office with other economic migrants and refugees to process a new resident permit. Though having worked in third world countries during my early career, I had acquired the necessary skillset to be able to put up with such an experience.

As I await to share a drink at my Thursday evening online social chat this week, I would like to wish everyone who reads this a peaceful and healthy Christmas even if the normal family festivities may have to be put on hold. The New Year will no doubt also be a muted occasion but the main thing to celebrate this time round is possibly the end of 2020 which has proved to be less than successful on several fronts. So best wishes to one and all and let's hope for some vaccinated happiness in 2021 to allow us all to join together again and complete the programme.

William Powles / IESF BS / 15.12.2020

NB : numbers & percentages quoted from sources given in the text