

**Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020** : as France enters its fourth week of Covid 19 confinement, our President David has requested an update from me about what is going on here in France. I thought therefore some general comments and a personal reflection of my experiences during the last three weeks might be of some interest as to where we now are in this unprecedented and shocking situation.

As from Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> March, individuals venturing out have been obliged to carry with them a completed, signed & dated form confirming their reason to leave home. An initial five point form was quickly replaced a week later by a seven point form. The time when leaving home now has to be added since the form is only valid for one hour. Other information to be filled in is the holder's gender, first name & surname, date & place of birth plus home address.

The seven acceptable reasons to be out and about of which only one can be ticked at a time, are, in summary :

- travel to & from place of work for front line workers
- shopping locally for essential work equipment or essential food
- personal health visits
- visits to vulnerable neighbours, child care arrangements or family funerals
- exercise within a one kilometre radius individually or with members of your home
- official attendance at a legal or municipal meeting
- participation as a volunteer on municipal business

Described by President Macron when he announced the lockdown measures as “being at war with an unseen enemy”, France is enforcing these criteria in draconian fashion with on the spot fines of 135 Euros for non-compliance rising to an eye watering 3 750 Euros fine plus imprisonment for recidivists after only four contraventions. Proof of identity is also required when stopped and checked. Even as I type, jogging as a form of exercise is being forbidden during the daytime with immediate effect in the Ile de France region. Fortunately, that won't have a big impact on my daily habits!

Having lived in France for almost 35 years, I am quite used to the need to carry identity papers though it is rare to be controlled in public. France loves administration and the systems & codes instigated by Napoleon are still used today. Administratively & professionally, everyone is pigeon holed which goes a long way towards explaining the love-hate relationship the public has with anyone in authority albeit that much of the population actually works in some form for the administration, the “*fonctionnaires*”.

That any person in authority, such as a gun toting gendarme, has the right to “control” you tends to lead to confrontational relationships rather than the friendly approach one might expect with the local bobby in UK and with whom you might pass the time of day or ask directions. One does not tend to fraternise with the police here in quite the same way. Having said that, under the current circumstances, there is a lot of sympathy for them - a big change from three months ago

when militant *gilets jaunes* roamed the street often to be confronted by riot police and water cannon - since the police are now the ones who have to enforce the regulations and are not even equipped with face masks which are commonly used elsewhere.

With the death toll from Covid 19 nearing 9 000, France is still a week or two ahead of UK where the number of deaths is now just over 5 300. The staggering number recorded in Italy (16 500) & Spain (13 800) indicates these countries are a couple of weeks ahead of France though there is some evidence that the daily death rate in these two countries has plateaued and their exit strategy from their lockdowns is now under discussion.

Italy hit a daily peak on 27<sup>th</sup> March with 971 deaths, this has been falling since with 636 deaths recorded yesterday. In Spain a daily peak of 950 deaths was recorded on 2<sup>nd</sup> April falling since to 637 yesterday. Here in France, a high of 588 deaths on 3<sup>rd</sup> April which then dropped for a couple of days has peaked again yesterday with 605 deaths so it is too early to record any trend here. In UK a high of 708 deaths on 4<sup>th</sup> April would indicate that the graph is still rising.

Surprisingly, amongst the most densely populated European countries, Germany with 1 800 deaths so far with an exceptional daily peak of 325 on 4<sup>th</sup> April, has not experienced anywhere near the catastrophe being experienced by its neighbours. Some commentators consider the German situation is perhaps due to their policy of widespread testing and being better prepared for such an extreme event. No doubt the post event debriefings will conclude which country's strategy was the most appropriate.

For those who like to study WHO statistics, refer to this link :

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/04/covid-19-coronavirus-breakdown-of-deaths-and-infections-worldwide>

Some of these statistical analyses show up some interesting points for European countries. Whilst Italy at 122.52 has the highest death rate per 1000 infections, the Netherlands are second with 99.30 deaths per 1000 whilst UK is third with 94.45 / Spain is fourth with 94.15 / France is fifth with 79.19. In Italy, by far the highest death by age bracket are those in their 80s at 42.71%, closely followed by those in their 70s at 35.57%. It would appear logical that this will be reflected elsewhere as the elderly are obviously the most vulnerable.

Of course the basis for these WHO figures requires some scrutiny. On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, France revealed an extra 1 400 deaths of elderly patients in retirement homes which are not included in the numbers above so as not to distort the statistics. However, their inclusion pushes up France's death total to well over 10 000.

The situation with regard to the elderly in care homes has become a national scandal. In some areas of France where hospital facilities are stretched to breaking point, administrators are having to decide who has the best chance of survival and thus access to the limited facilities. Military planes and SNCF high speed trains are being used to transport very ill victims to hospitals

in other parts of France and even into Germany where there are still available intensive care facilities.

From a personal perspective, retirement has been good training for confinement. For 30 years I commuted daily from leafy suburbia in packed trains to my office in central Paris. For the last three years, the need to commute has disappeared so I can now chose when I get up and go out though I recognise it is good for the body and soul to maintain a reasonably disciplined routine. Since my wife continues to work, albeit now from home, and the kids have grown up and left, we enjoy a role reversal for household chores whereby I tend to do the shopping, washing, ironing, some cooking and a bit less cleaning. Like most blokes I know, I really can't see the dust.

Shopping now has become an expedition, face masks are de rigueur attire when queuing and inside shops. Above all, patience is the key. At least there is no rationing though shoppers with too many toilet rolls get dirty looks from those still queueing. Queues are shortest around mid-morning so that suits me. After some initial panic buying for toilet rolls, people seem to have rediscovered their good manners, at least around where we live. I have learned from online videos that toilet rolls come in useful as people practice their football skills indoors. And I thought they were for eating! There is now plenty of food available though flour has permanently disappeared from our supermarket shelves. The one in one out rule applies at the local shops and supermarkets restrict entry to about twenty people every 10 minutes or so. It seems to work so the cash desks are normally uncluttered with people when you get to them.

Unfortunately our food markets - an institution close to the heart of the French - were closed within a week of the restrictions coming into force since no way was found to respect the social distancing criteria. This remains at 1 metre between people compared to the 2 metre rule applied in UK. Why there should be such a difference puzzles me.

One benefit to have come out of all this, at least in my opinion, is prohibition of the elaborate French greeting, the etiquette requirement to kiss everybody seemingly regardless of your level of friendship with them. And whether one, two, three or even four cheek pecks was sufficient or even desirable and wanted, the same etiquette often being applied to both genders, a veritable *cauchemar* for a typically reserved Brit (but I digress .....).

I am also perplexed by the different approach our governments have taken to apply the rules. As explained above, in France they are legally binding and punishable by large fines for non-compliance. In UK, it appears they remain as guidelines and every stiff upper lip self-respecting citizen is expected to demonstrate typical British wartime fighting spirit of goodwill and adhere to them. Carrying id and even a form being considered anathema to the great British public, cajoling is employed as opposed to enforcing. A somewhat vague hope perhaps in view of the evident attraction of the Welsh Hills prior to the UK lockdown being announced and last Sunday's group outings to local parks and commons which remain closed in France.

The Queen's message on Sunday night was very well received in France, a constant strong voice during such uncertain times even when her first minister is testing the NHS facilities at first hand. The French loved it, anything to do with the British monarchy has a huge audience here on prime time TV, radio and in glossy magazines such is the interest of the French about them for the glamour and celebrity that they radiate. So much for republican sentiment.

It is all very strange and quite horrific sometimes to watch & listen to the saturation news about those seriously affected by Covid 19 though TV and radio attempt to concentrate on the few good news stories rather than too much of the bleak reality. Doctors with oratorical skills who provide clear and concise answers with a smile are preferred to the dour professorial types who lecture. As is the case everywhere, we are extremely grateful to those in public service who risk their own health to help others, I am not sure I would want to put myself at such risk. They certainly deserve their public applause every evening at 8pm along with the balcony concerts in districts with apartments.

From the endless statistics put out by the TV channels every evening, we have learned that we actually live in the most seriously affected department in France (93 Seine Saint Denis) with the largest number of infections and highest mortality rate over 10% of the national figure. Living as we do at the very eastern extremity of this department in a leafy residential commune adjacent to the river Marne with our own garden in which to exercise, it is easy to forget the less fortunate living in high-rise low-cost apartments in the densely packed urban "immigrant cities" which comprise a large portion of the department to the north and north-east of Paris. In those districts where crime and drug use is above the national average, Covid 19 is rampant, where confinement and social distancing has limited appeal and is virtually impossible to enforce in areas often considered no-go by the police.

This whole catastrophic event which many visionaries foresaw several years ago following the Sars & Ebola outbreaks is providing a salutary lesson. Very few governments appear to have allowed for or been prepared for it. It certainly puts good health and proper hygiene into perspective even as the global economy is falling off a cliff. The world will take a long time to recover and will probably never be the same again but one can only hope it might become a better place for all of us who are trying to live together in it.

In the meantime, I am enjoying the total lack of urban noise as I stroll around my small patch of English countryside admiring the weeds, soaking in the peace and quiet and birdsong that surrounds us, as well as the clatter of the Canada geese clearly audible from the river bank just 50 metres away.

Stay safe, staying inside.

*William Powles / IESF BS / 7.04.2020*

*NB : numbers & percentages quoted accurate up to end of 6.04.2020 / source WHO / Euronews*