

Tuesday 28th April 2020 : it is now three weeks since my previous update from France on 7th April and over here we are today entering our seventh week of Covid-19 confinement. The first peak of deaths is now passed and on Monday 13th April in his third televised address to the Nation, President Macron announced that the *deconfinement* process will commence on Monday 11th May. Whilst insisting this would be a progressive strategy depending on scientific and medical proof to allow it to be enacted, it was a bold but considered target.

On Sunday afternoon 19th April we were treated to a two hour television marathon from the Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, summarising the Covid-19 story so far and the way in which the government is assessing the situation going forward to meet the President's target date. For those interested in learning a bit of French and examining more closely the Prime Minister's presentation slides, refer to the link :

https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/document/document/2020/04/presentation_-_conference_de_presse_sur_le_covid19_-_19.04.2020.pdf

This afternoon, Mr Philippe presented his findings to the *Assemblée Générale* which were immediately voted into law and we now know how France will come out of lockdown in an orderly and progressive manner beginning on Monday 11th May.

Interestingly, this approach is the opposite of that being followed in UK whereby over here, the President dictates policy and the Prime Minister aided by his government is entrusted to execute it. It appears that in UK the withdrawal from lockdown strategy is currently being discussed in high office and once agreed then a date will be fixed to enact it.

I have to admit a preference for the French approach as it has the tendency to focus minds and avoids the somewhat tedious daily briefings enjoyed in UK which each time attract the same platitudes and questions none of which appear to be answered in full. Initially, daily briefings seemed a good idea and were well received but as time has worn on and lockdown lethargy has increased it seems difficult to think up new things to say which garner the same interest as before so very rarely is anything new learnt.

Recognition of the amazing job being realised by the NHS is positive and the good news stories such as Captain Tom Moore's amazing fund raising success are welcome but the underlying terrible message has long been received and the vast majority of the British public appears to respect the constraints imposed without the need for paperwork and heavy fines as practiced over here. To date in France, the police have recorded 15 million checks resulting in 900 000 fines being imposed on people for not respecting the conditions described in my earlier missive.

Although there is inevitable criticism about the French strategy from his political opponents, the date of 11th May chosen by Mr Macron is also revealing. May is not the most productive month in the French calendar hosting as it usually does four public holidays (Labour Day on 1st / Victory in Europe 1945 on 8th / Ascension on 21st / Pentecost actually on 1st June this year) and the

resulting long weekends they preclude. This year, these days fall obligingly on either Friday or Monday except for Ascension which falls on a Thursday, so time lost to the economy is kept to a relative minimum.

Three four-day weeks and one three-day week (a public holiday on Thursday inevitably means workers do the “*pont*” and take Friday off as well) in six consecutive weeks is considered a relatively minor inconvenience to the economic output of the nation especially as France is now in deep recession. GDP has dropped a massive 10% so far this year. From a modest +1.5% to +2% GDP forecast range for 2020, France is now about -8% in the red, a situation not experienced since the end of World War 2. The 8th May public holiday will seem rather poignant this year.

Such a relatively delayed reopening date is also judicious because it allows France to observe and learn from those other European countries which have chosen an earlier date to come out of lockdown. Germany & Austria have already opened many services and relaxed restrictions, Belgium and the Netherlands have chosen 4th May to begin their lifting of restrictions.

The scientific and medical facts justify Mr Macron’s forecast that 11th May remains a prudent date to begin the long slow road to recovery. The France figures for Covid-19 from today (28th April 2020) with daily increase / decrease are as follows :

- total confirmed cases : 129 859 (increase of 1 520)
- total cumulative deaths : 23 660 (increase of 367)

In hospitals :

- hospitalised : 27 484 (decrease of 571)
- returned home : 46 886 (increase of 1 373)
- in intensive care : 4 387 (decrease of 221)
- died in hospital : 14 810 (increase of 313)

In care homes & elsewhere :

- confirmed cases : 30 817 (increase of 590)
- probable cases : 39 076 (increase of 1 573)
- died in care homes and elsewhere : 8 850 (increase of 52)

Source 28.04.20 : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>

The hospital daily death number peaked on 6th April at 605 and has since been gradually decreasing. Daily figures tend to fluctuate greatly and are often lower at weekends when reporting is slower before rising again on Mondays but the general tendency is now in a downward direction.

Apart from the continuing urgent need for disposable PPE clothing (masks, gloves, coats, hats, slippers) the Prime Minister informed the Nation on 19th April that French hospital emergency facilities were by then coping adequately and the temporary anticipated shortage of additional ventilators had been absorbed. We learnt that France had a stock of 5 000 reanimation beds and

at any one time 4 500 are normally occupied. By definition, the beds are vacated on a regular basis either by the patient recovering or dying.

To cope with the expected increased demand due to the pandemic, an additional 2 500 beds were created to bring the stock up to 7 500 (some of these being military tent installations set up in hospital car parks). An additional 7 500 beds sourced from other parts of the hospital system were allocated as a reserve resulting from a closedown of routine hospital operations. These additional beds remain in reserve but have so far not been required.

This led to fake news claims with video footage of empty and deserted hospitals that France had dramatically overestimated the Covid-19 problem and was misleading the public with regards its severity and necessity to bring the country to its knees by enforcing its lockdown policy. This was quickly explained away by government pointing out that because personnel had been diverted to help deal with the Covid-19 crisis, vast swathes of the hospital system that normally dealt with routine issues had been closed until further notice. The same video footage was then relayed by the TV networks to justify this explanation.

The key number in all this is the infection rate (the number of other people infected by a virus carrier) which in France is currently well below 1. At its peak, this rate of infection figure was above 6 which created the exponential spread and reason to confine in the first place.

The fear now of course is that when confinement is relaxed and people are allowed to mix again, then the virus will continue to spread and the infection rate will rise again creating a second peak. In his 19th April presentation, the Prime Minister emphasised this risk as a justification of the imperative to only gradually reopen the economy in order to minimise the chances of this happening. Until a cure is discovered the population must learn to live with this risk and behave accordingly to minimise its impact. It is unlikely a reliable antidote will be found for at least twelve months at the earliest so life as we knew it two months ago will take a long time, if ever, to become the norm again. Probably a new norm will be discovered to reflect the experiences of the past two months and become the new reality of the way to live in the future.

In France, face masks will be an important part of this future and the new laws confirmed this afternoon will make the wearing of them obligatory in public places such as on trains, in work places or whilst shopping. Again this is contrary to the thinking in UK where it is considered face masks are not an infallible protection and will lead the wearer to a false sense of security but the scientific thinking here (and elsewhere in Europe) is strongly in favour of it as a means of limiting the spread just as social distancing will be maintained (still only a metre here).

Four sectors of the French economy are considered vital for the first steps of relaxing the lockdown on 11th May, as follows :

- non-essential retail / non-essential industry / transportation / schools

In reality, when studying the long list of “essential” shops that were not affected by the lockdown criteria and were allowed to remain open, it is interesting to note that it was not just food shops that were allowed to continue to operate. Newsagents, tobacconists, chemists, computer repair shops, etc, remained open and many of the larger white goods stores, bookshops, TV & video outlets, Amazon, etc continued to operate by offering home delivery.

Some industrial facilities have also been allowed to continue during the lockdown especially those that retooled to assist the national effort to source essential requirements. A week ago in a much publicised affair, the huge Toyoto car plant in Valenciennes (northern France) went back to work as an experiment to see how some limited car production could be managed under strict sanitary conditions. Needless to say, their rivals, PSA (Peugeot & Citroen) and Renault objected and were allowed to conduct similar “experiments”.

Public transportation (trains, metros, trams & buses) has continued during the lockdown operating very limited schedules (one an hour) and this schedule will be ramped up as more people circulate again.

A great deal of attention has been given over to how the government will reopen schools. Much emphasis was made by Mr Macron to this vital sector in the “continuing life of the nation” and the obligation of a responsible government to educate its youth which is the future of a stable society. To the great relief of many exasperated parents, especially those who live in small apartments, kindergartens and primary schools (*écoles*) will lead the way followed by secondary schools (*collèges*) and high schools (*lycées*) at later dates. At this stage university students are not included in the debate as government considers this age group is the most computer literate and socially networked, thus suitably equipped to be able to continue their studies online with their lecturers and tutors as they have been doing during the lockdown.

As is normal practice, government will devolve the responsibility for carrying out the new regulations to the local authorities (*Departements and Communes*) so the *Prefet* and the local *Maire* will be obliged to carry the can. More pertinent though with respect to kick starting the education system is government passing this hot potato down the line to teachers to manage how “returning to school” will actually work in practice. Principals & teaching staff are now racking their brains about how best to control their energetic charges whilst adhering to social distancing and mask wearing requirements, as well as trying to impart some knowledge at the same time, certainly this will be a formidable challenge for all interested parties.

Not under consideration for the moment are the sectors dealing with hospitality (restaurants, bars, cafés) and entertainment (theatres, cinemas, museums, sports). Interestingly in the former category, hotels have never been obliged to close as they are also classified as residential accommodation. Hotel restaurants have been obliged to close and only room service has been allowed. Many hotels, especially those in tourist areas, have voluntarily preferred to close since bookings have evaporated and operators cannot afford to stay open and keep staff employed.

Worth a mention by way of comparison is a reference to the WHO current figures for other European countries. Although the published numbers on the WHO website (refer to the link : <https://covid19.who.int/>) don't precisely tally with the France statistics given on the French government website, they do provide a simplified comparison between countries assuming all the declared figures have corresponding levels of inaccuracy.

Thus it can be seen that of the 1 359 380 confirmed cases of Covid-19 declared in Europe, 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 (interestingly in reverse proportion to their population size), are :

- Germany : 81.5 million / 155 193 cases / 5 750 deaths / 3.7% / 7 deaths per 100K
- UK : 66.7 million / 152 844 cases / 20 732 deaths / 13.6% / 31 deaths per 100K
- France : 65.8 million / 123 279 cases / 22 821 deaths / 18.5% / 34 deaths per 100K
- Italy : 60.0 million / 197 675 cases / 26 644 deaths / 13.5% / 44 deaths per 100K
- Spain : 45.7 million / 207 634 cases / 23 190 deaths / 11.2% / 51 deaths per 100K

These figures for UK only include hospital deaths which is far from the total true death toll. UK announced today the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases at 161 145, an increase of 3 996 from the previous day. The death toll from Covid-19 was up to 21 678 in hospitals (far higher than the WHO figures), an increase of 586 since the day before. Not included in this total are those who died in nursing homes or elsewhere which according to the declaration at the daily briefing earlier today was 4 343 since Easter or about one sixth of the total death toll. This implies a total death toll due to Covid-19 in excess of 26 000 (39 deaths per 100K) putting it well above France which routinely includes its care home deaths in its total Covid-19 death tally.

Germany stays well behind the death tally of the other four countries recording just 7 deaths per 100K of population. As noted in my previous missive, some commentators attribute this to more extensive testing and a subsequently quicker reaction time for treatment. France and UK seem to be in agreement about mass testing, perhaps because they still do not have the capacity or ability to test so many people in such a short time. Both countries note that testing only indicates the state of health of a suspected patient at the time of the testing, there is nothing to suggest that a patient with a negative result may not become infected a short time later so apparently that is a reason not to test in the first place. Today's reporting from UK notes that testing has become a more pressing issue with a daily testing target of 100 000 by the end of this month (an optimistic 36% increase in the next two days from the current 73 400 daily capacity).

Having said that, one feels strongly for the poor chap identified on BBC Radio 4 Any Answers last Saturday who complained of symptoms but was told by his doctor to go home and rest. Being of the generation who believed his doctor's advice was the best available and not wishing to make a fuss, he duly returned home and put himself into solitary confinement only to be found dead by his son a few days later.

Another key point which has surfaced in France (and elsewhere) following much laboratory testing to find an antidote is the fact that there is no indication that having recovered from a Covid-19 attack makes a patient immune from being attacked again. The original logic of herd immunity therefore also appears to have no credence especially since the very low percentage of confirmed cases, less than 0,2% of the population in France is a long way from the 80% plus of the population likely to become affected which was originally banded about. Thus it is extremely likely that a second wave of infection will arrive once lockdown is lifted and people mix again. In his 19th April presentation, the Prime Minister laboured this point that we must get used to living with this virus and continue with the requisite sanitary precautions until the antidote is found.

His exposé to the *Assemblée Générale* this afternoon having now concluded, we have learnt from Edouard Philippe what the procedure will be in France going forward as from Monday 11th May. He noted this is heavily dependent on the area in which one lives, departments with a high level of Covid-19 related infection and corresponding deaths will be treated differently and opened up later. There are after all vast parts of France which have been relatively untouched by the virus though policing this two tier operation will be fraught with complexity and malcontent as most people are becoming impatient with the situation.

So, from Monday 11th May, the departments of France will be colour coded red or green depending on the Covid-19 situation in each, travel between different coloured departments will be strictly controlled. Relaxing lockdown will only commence from this date in green departments (or perhaps smaller areas) where the following key points will come into force :

- freedom to leave home within a 100km radius without completing a form (presumably that implies free use of one's car again)
- reopening of public parks and footpaths with social distancing of 1 metre
- obligation to wear a face mask in a public place such as in shops or on public transport (masks will be freely provided in each *commune* since this is not a voluntary requirement, our *Maire* has already ordered 14 000 allowing two per person and the local ladies in the sewing club are producing about 100 per day)
- all non-essential shops can open again, including markets, applicable constraints such as social distancing & mask wearing as in essential shops, this does not include indoor gyms or any establishment where groups of more than ten people might congregate
- kindergarten & primary schools (*écoles*) will reopen but classes will be limited to 15 pupils, attendance will be voluntary depending on wishes of parents (not sure how that works as the average class is 25 to 30, it is quite likely that all parents will want to offload their children into school as soon as possible - French parents working in the private sector tend to consider kindergarten and primary school as a free child minding service)
- secondary schools (*collèges*) will reopen progressively on 18th & 25th May on same voluntary basis with similar class size restrictions and pupils wearing face masks
- high schools (*lycées*) will reopen from 2nd June, students will wear face masks, online tuition to continue until full attendance is resumed

- public transport frequency will return to almost normal with the proviso that passengers only occupy alternate seats (not sure how that will be policed)
- home working to continue where possible for those in non-essential occupations
- all professional sport is cancelled until at least September (ie : no more football or rugby matches this season, it remains to be seen how cycling's *Tour de France* will react, it has already been provisionally postponed from July until August, most probably it will be postponed again to September unless it receives special dispensation, as the biggest sporting event in the world after the Olympics and the football World Cup and still free to watch, it is highly unlikely that it will be cancelled altogether)
- amateur group sporting activity or contact sport will not be allowed until at least 2nd June
- outdoor informal meetings of less than 5000 people with social distancing will be allowed though cultural events and concerts remain banned until at least 2nd June
- funerals limited to 20 participants, religious meetings deferred until after 2nd June,
- reassessment at the end of May to consider the possibility of re-opening bars, cafés and restaurants as well as theatres, cinemas, museums and art galleries from 2nd June
- further consideration to be given at a later date about travelling further afield (ie : plane travel), the country remains closed to foreign tourists (France used to be the most popular country in the world for tourism and this sector was a major revenue earner)

And so the fun begins (metaphorically speaking). Some of the conditions announced today appear on first view to be somewhat contradictory but clarification is promised before the target date and definition of red & green zones will be identified in time according to medical results.

I don't suppose any of the above will drastically affect my personal routine, senior citizens have been requested to continue to stay indoors though responsible visiting appears to be permitted again from 11th May providing one lives in a green zone. That doesn't sound too promising for residents in the Paris area and surrounding suburbs which is by far the worst affected region in France. We can only hope that colour coding may be on a more localised commune by commune basis otherwise there may be significant civil strife to contend with as well.

We mourn friends and health workers taken before their time by this terrible virus but nevertheless we try to enjoy each day as it presents itself for better or worse.

Hopefully our many new friends within IESF British Section will struggle on gamely until we can all meet up together again under happier circumstances.

Stay safe, staying inside.

William Powles / IESF BS / 28.04.2020

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