

Tuesday 9th June 2020 : three weeks further on and easing of the pandemic lockdown is well underway in France. Now into phase 2 of easing since Monday 25th May, no region is still red and only the eight departments in the Paris area are categorised as orange from a statistical point of view, as well as two of the overseas territories, Mayotte & Guyana. So whilst care and attention is still applicable everywhere, slightly stricter conditions are in force in these 10 departments compared to the 91 green departments that comprise the rest of France and its overseas dependencies. Though everywhere, the draconian lockdown rules and regulations have been



lifted and people are free again to travel around mainland France. The SNCF is once again offering a full train service throughout the country, though in the Ile de France orange region, commuter travel during peak times is still restricted to essential workers.

Following the successful reopening of kindergarten and primary schools from 11th May where classes were limited to just 10 children, all schools were reopened progressively from Tuesday 2nd June from secondary to sixth form including their lunchtime canteens with a limit of 15 pupils per class. As before, the exact conditions for each establishment were left to the mayor and his municipal officials to suit each situation. Attendance at school remains voluntary and parents are left to make that decision for their own children up until the end of the school term on 4th July.

Bars & restaurants also reopened on Tuesday 2nd June to serve customers outside at tables spaced to conform to the 1 metre spacing rule. Tables for more than 10 persons together are not allowed but the authorities have been lenient and allow adjacent pavement use even though not within the confines of the restaurant since use of the normal inside space remains forbidden. Waiters are also supposed to respect the social distancing regulation when serving clients though this being somewhat difficult, they are obliged to wear a mask. Drive through fast food outlets have reopened generating two hour long traffic queues to satisfy cravings for a Big Mac.

Parks & gardens, beaches, lakes and forests are all open again for exercise but with the limit on groups of no more than ten people. Masks remain obligatory in public transport & taxis and are recommended in places where social distancing is difficult such as supermarkets and shops. All shops are now open including service facilities such as hairdressers, barbers and keep fit centres. Food markets are open again with access controlled by police enforcing one way circulation, stall holders are obliged to erect plastic screens with openings, customers have to queue respecting social distancing and everyone has to wear a mask.

Libraries and museums are also gradually reopening. The Chateau de Versailles reopened last weekend to great public fanfare as the first major public building to restart its busy programme. Of course, like other establishments of this type, until as such time as foreign tourists are once again allowed into France, such a popular attraction will not be able to recoup anything like its normal level of revenue to pay for its substantial operating costs. Today's announcements included the news that the Eiffel Tower will open again to the public on 25th June but access will be restricted up to the second floor and by staircase only as lifts will not be in operation. So that limits visits to the moderately fit. Mask wearing will be obligatory as an additional challenge.

Private ceremonies such as parties, weddings and funerals limited to 10 people are once again allowed and places of worship, already open for private meditation are now being permitted to hold services for larger groups as long as the organisers ensure social distancing is respected and the congregation wears masks. The entertainment industry remains in lockdown, cinemas and theatres remain closed until at least 22nd June as do discotheques, dance halls, casinos, and amusement parks. Swimming pools, gymnasias and sports halls all remain closed and team sports are still not allowed even though teams can train again either individually or in small groups. Any sport whether amateur or professional with crowds in attendance is not permitted.

For those who have survived financially through the crisis without too much adverse effect to their income, thoughts now turn towards the approaching holiday season. Resort and rural hotels and holiday accommodation are reopening in anticipation of holiday bookings. Visits to the elderly in care homes are once again authorised though all such establishments are obliged to enforce sanitary conditions to prevent any propagation of the virus.

The next announcement following further assessment will be on Monday 15th June when border controls may be relaxed. At the moment, travel within the European Union is strictly controlled and travel outside the European Union is to all intents and purposes banned for the general public. Borders remain closed to foreign tourists. UK now falls into this second category with 14 days reciprocal quarantine being imposed for those who want to try their luck.

The government continues to insist people adhere to these simplified conditions in order to prevent a resurgence of the epidemic though as is often the case in politics, events have overtaken advice as spontaneous worldwide public gatherings in support of "Black Lives Matter" following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis show that people have had enough of lockdown and are prepared to make their own judgements as to the necessity of continuing to respect government advice on social distancing.

France appears better positioned to cope with this than the UK as here the epidemic appears to have nearly run its course and is slowly disappearing when compared with the related facts and figures. Time will tell whether this is a correct judgement call or not. The emphasis in the country is now more about resurrecting the economy, getting people back to work and children back to school, as well as dealing with the psychological fallout and mental depression that affects many who have faced personal hardship and tragic loss during the lockdown phase.

Before the long summer break, there is still unfinished political business to worry about. The lockdown imposed on Tuesday 17th March was just two days after the first round of the municipal elections on Sunday 15th March when mayors for over 35 000 communes were voted into office for a mandate of six years. Those candidates not receiving a clear 50% majority were obliged to enter a second round run-off a week later in a similar procedure to that adopted for the Presidential elections every five years.

Because of the lockdown, the second round scheduled on Sunday 22nd March never took place and much intellectual debate ensued as to whether this invalidated the whole election process. It was decided that due to the exceptional circumstances the process was not invalidated, some new laws were hastily approved to confirm this exception and the whole thing was put on hold until the situation improved to the extent that the second round, where required, could be held at some later date without compromising the population's general health.

Those 30 100 mayors (86%) who achieved a first round overall majority were sworn in with their teams and since then, France has been run at a local level by a combination of newly elected or re-elected mayors and existing mayors who have had their mandates extended. Politically not an ideal scenario so the government has been keen to regularise the situation as soon as possible and in any case before the holiday season if the virus issue allows. Sunday 28th June has now been chosen to run the second round in the 4 900 communes, 14% of the country, where the first round was not decisive.

One peculiarity of the French municipal election system is that any candidate receiving more than 10% of the first round vote is entitled to take part in the run-off. Thus in my small home town in suburban Paris with its population of only 6 485 inhabitants of which 4 805 are eligible to vote, the same three candidates who presented themselves in the first round are vying against each other again in the second round. In the first round, the incumbent mayor only received 46% approval, 976 votes. The second candidate won 42% approval, 904 votes, and the third candidate attracted 12% approval, 249 votes. 41 voters (1%) spoiled their papers so their votes were not counted. None of this was helped by an extremely high level of 55% absenteeism (2 635) as many anticipated lockdown would follow to the extent that only 45% (2 170) of the population went to the polls. The leading first round margin was thus only 72 votes so there is everything to play for in the second round which is likely to be a close run thing as the emphasis will be on trying to persuade those who did not vote the first time to turn up on 28th June. So all three candidates have been out again on the stump and are canvassing hard.

For the average inhabitant, the mayoral election is often considered more important than the Presidential election as the winning candidate and his team have a more direct impact on the way of life enjoyed in the town. So this year has proved particularly complicated with the parallel problem of Covid-19. By the time of my next briefing, the outcome should be known. Covid-19 is the second catastrophe to have hit the town during the incumbent mayor's mandate. In February 2018, the river Marne which forms the northern and western town limit broke its banks and overtopped the retaining wall flooding many streets.

Another event which has enhanced the community spirit and brought residents together to help each other in times of difficulty, one would like to think that regardless of whoever is elected to office, the community good management, camaraderie and goodwill would not change.

The France figures for Covid-19 up to the end of today (9th June 2020) with daily increase / decrease are as follows :

- total confirmed cases : 154 591 (increase of 403)
- total cumulative deaths : 29 296 (increase of 87)

In hospitals :

- hospitalised : 11 961 (decrease of 354)
- new patients hospitalised : 169 (increase of 24)
- returned home : 71 506 (increase of 444)
- in intensive care : 955 (decrease of 69)
- new patients in intensive care : 15 (decrease of 8)
- died in hospital : 18 912 (increase of 53)

In care homes & elsewhere :

- confirmed cases : 37 599 (increase of 194)
- died : 10 384 (increase of 34)

Source 9.06.20 : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>

The various graphs indicate a further overall gradual decline across all results in France since the peaks between the end of March and the middle of April. Now two months later the figures demonstrate that the epidemic in France appears to be under control and stable.

To evaluate how France has suffered worldwide and with respect to other European countries, the WHO tables and graphs at <https://covid19.who.int/> provide a useful reference though these don't precisely tally with the French government statistics. Also to be remembered is that each country reports against slightly different criteria. However, they allow a simplified comparison between countries assuming all the declared figures have corresponding levels of inaccuracy.

Since the last briefing three weeks ago on 19th May there has been a 2.3 million increase (49%) of reported cases to more than 7 million worldwide with the concentration now in USA & South America. In the same period, the worldwide death toll due to Covid-19 has risen by 88 107 (28%) to 404 396 deaths (5.7% of cases resulting in death).

Worldwide, Brazil is now second on the list (after USA) having declared 691 758 cases resulting in 36 455 deaths (5.3% of cases resulting in death), a huge increase in the past three weeks (+450 678 confirmed cases & +20 337 deaths).

Europe has now suffered 2 303 361 confirmed cases, 33% of the world total down from 40% three weeks ago. UK still has the highest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Europe with 287 403 (only USA, Brazil & Russia have more worldwide), resulting in the highest number of deaths in Europe with 40 597 (14.1% of cases resulting in death).

This means that, in terms of deaths resulting from Covid-19 infection, UK now has the second highest mortality rate in the world behind only USA which has recorded 110 220 deaths from 1 933 560 confirmed cases (5.7% of cases resulting in death).

As in the previous briefing, 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 :

- UK : 66.7 million / 287 403 cases / 40 597 deaths / 14.1% / 61 deaths per 100K
- Spain : 45.7 million / 241 717 cases / 27 136 deaths / 11.2% / 59 deaths per 100K
- Italy : 60.0 million / 235 278 cases / 33 964 deaths / 14.4% / 57 deaths per 100K
- Germany : 81.5 million / 184 543 cases / 8 711 deaths / 4.7% / 11 deaths per 100K
- France : 65.8 million / 150 413 cases / 29 149 deaths / 19.4% / 44 deaths per 100K

The trend continues with a large variance country by country in the number of deaths resulting from confirmed cases. France has the worst record with just over 19% but the statistic comparing deaths related to population size, UK has the worst record with 61 deaths per 100K. Though, as commented before, comparisons of this sort are not very representative due to the different reporting criteria adopted so not much should be read into them. The main point to retain is that the figures are slowing down in continental Europe where almost constant returns can be observed during the last month or so. This justifies government actions in easing the lockdowns whilst maintaining vigilance and precautionary measures to avoid a recurrence.

This is good news though the continuing high figures in UK are worrying and have lead many commentators to consider that easing in the UK is going too fast. Here in France though, media reports are reassuring that the government strategy has generally been good and the population has mainly reacted responsibly to the measures imposed. It will no doubt take a long while for many people to recover from the psychological scars of lockdown, a unique experience in most people's lives. The majority of the population is too young to remember the trauma of the last World War which has often been used as a reminder of the last time the country has been subjected to such a crisis but it seems a wild exaggeration to compare a four month pandemic and 400K associated deaths with the atrocities of a six year war which cost millions of lives and wanton destruction.

The world now looks forward to a period of revival, a proper virus antidote and better leadership from its elected officials. Even if the battle to beat Covid-19 may soon be won, the war against racism and global warming remains to be fought.

William Powles / IESF BS / 9.06.2020

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