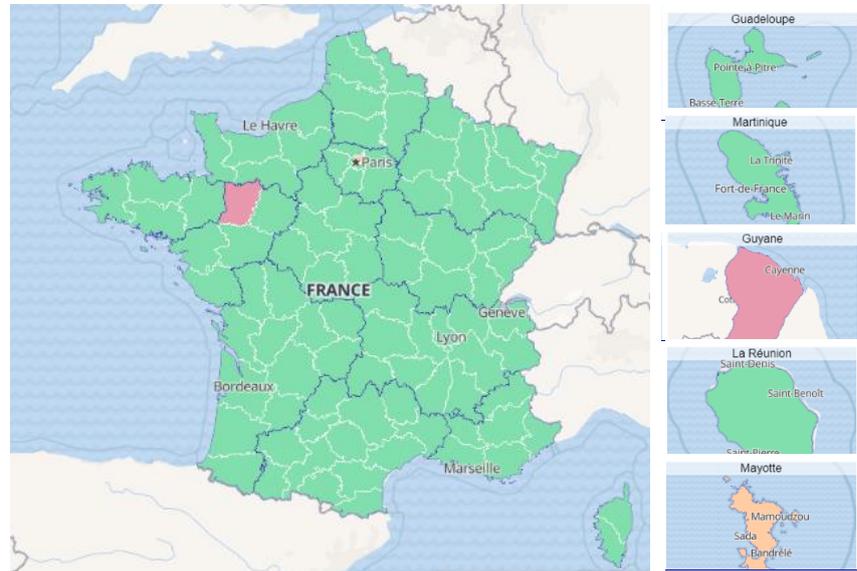


Tuesday 21st July 2020 : another three weeks has passed and with surprise, I note this is my sixth newsletter since my first one on 7th April some three and a half months ago. A lot has happened during that time, the lockdown is but a memory here in France but the real worry is that it may

be re-imposed as local outbreaks are occurring especially in popular holiday locations as people travel again for their summer holidays. Although all of mainland France remains classified green in terms of the current health legislation and freedom to travel about, two departments are causing concern as their incident rates of people testing



positive per one hundred thousand of the population over a seven day period have soared.

The rural department of Mayenne (53) in the Loire region is now rated a red zone with an incident rate of 52.7 (R value here peaked just two weeks ago at 1.5 though has now dropped back to 1.1) and the department of Seine Saint Denis (93), where I live, geographically a very small department (you will have to look hard on the main map above to even spot it) but a very densely populated suburban area to the north & east of Paris, is rated orange with an incident rate of 10.1 (R value here also at 1.1). Bearing in mind that the national average for the incident rate is 5.7 (down from a peak of 51.0 on 3rd April) it is worrying to note the high values for these two specific departments. In addition, the national average for the R value is gradually climbing again and is currently at 1.2 after a steady period at 0.8 at the beginning of June.

The same two overseas departments Guyane (973) and Mayotte (976) remain orange in terms of their general health situation but the mini maps above indicating their incident rates show Guyane with a 321.3 incident rate has tipped far into the red though the R value there is dropping to just under 1.0 as the health authorities struggle to contain the situation in these two under developed areas. By comparison Mayotte has an incident rate of 17.9 with an R value of 0.5 so the situation is improving there. It should be noted that the incident rates and R values quoted have only been collated up to 12th July so are not as up to date as the latest information on the general situation charts. Generally though, the situation is holding its own though extreme care is still required as people travel on holiday. The Brittany region for example is at threat, the most westerly department there of Finisterre has just recorded a sharp incident rate rise to 5.4 (just below the national average of 5.7) from 1.2 in just five days even as the R value there has dropped from 1.2 to 0.9.

The travel & tourism sector is keeping a very close eye on this data, whilst at the same time encouraging people to take holidays and revive local economies, any action could jeopardise the

long term security of the region they are trying to promote. Most people who do not have second homes in a particular region are booking at the last minute based on the latest medical advice. To be avoided at all cost is what appears to be happening in UK with tourists flooding local beauty spots, blocking roads with their inconsiderate parking and then leaving their litter all over the place. One despairs sometimes about the habits of some people.

Shortly after the previous newsletter, as predicted following the second round of the municipal elections, the popular Edouard Philippe agreed to resign as Prime Minister leading to the resignation of the whole government. As his replacement, President Emmanuel Macron appointed the Parliamentarian Jean Castex, the man responsible for carrying out the lockdown easing strategy so in many ways, a logical choice as successor at a time when the health of the nation is as important as its economic recovery. Coming from a similar right wing background to his predecessor, albeit from the other end of the country, Mr Castex was deemed to be a safe pair of hands for the remaining two years of Mr Macron's presidential mandate though the appointment was inevitably criticised by the left wing as being "more of the same thing" and hardly a good choice to heal the rifts in French society.

Hailing from the southern tip of France (he was re-elected mayor with an overwhelming majority in the first round of the municipal elections of the small town of Prades in the foothills of the Pyrenees just up the road from Perpignan), Mr Castex has an interesting Gascony accent. Like his predecessor before him, he has put aside this mayoral role for the time being whilst he serves as Prime Minister.

His appointed government contains an interesting collection of old and new ministers, some reappointed to their previous roles or shuffled to new posts but also some fresh faces. One colourful choice is the new culture minister Roselyne Bachelot. At 73 years young, she holds a doctorate in pharmaceutical medicine and politically is a right wing Gaullist. A one-time local counsellor in the Loire region, deputy in the National Assembly (lower house) and later in the European Parliament, she has been in and out of ministerial office since 2002 serving under Presidents Chirac & Sarkozy being in charge of such various ministries as environment, ecology & sustainable development, health, youth & sports, solidarity & social cohesion.

Since 2012 when she last left office as left wing President Francois Holland came to power, she has been a hilarious and outspoken TV commentator and opera buff, perhaps the reason why she has now got the culture job. Unafraid to speak her mind, in 2017 she was found guilty of character defamation having accused tennis player Rafael Nadal on national TV of doping. He sued her, bearing in mind his iconic sporting status in France as 12 time winner of the Roland Garros open tennis tournament and current title holder. She was fined a nominal 500 Euros and had to pay him 10 000€ of damages with interest. A real fun person and very popular (depending on your point of view), the government will be all the more lively for her inclusion.

But I digress. Liking to think of himself as "one of the people", this choice of new government lead President Macron into a physical confrontation with an outspoken leader of the notorious "*gilets jaunes*" brigade whilst the presidential couple were enjoying a Sunday afternoon stroll

through the *Jardin des Tuileries*. Mr Macron defended this verbal aggression and held an impromptu debate with the fellow which had the news channels rushing to record it and his security team in a state of high tension. Noting that this was all part and parcel of the democratic debate and freedom of self-expression which the French State holds dear, Mr Macron allowed the chap to win himself plenty of airtime and avoid any prosecution for public aggravation and disorder. All very entertaining.

With bigger fish to fry, Mr Macron hosted an impressive but toned down televised ceremony on the *Place de la Concorde* on 14th July to mark *La Fête Nationale* (Bastille Day) honouring the countries of Germany, Austria, Luxembourg and Switzerland which had received French Covid-19 intensive care patients at the beginning of the pandemic when hospitals in the east of France were submerged with cases and could not cope. Because of the coronavirus restrictions, the traditional military parade down the *Champs Elysées* in front of the public was cancelled and replaced by a restricted event by invitation only with social distancing and mask wearing in evidence. *Place de la Concorde* was converted into a Roman style arena for a parade with the theme "*une nation engagée, unie et solidaire*" (one nation, committed, united and standing together). About 2 000 military personnel took part, just half of the normal turnout.

To begin, the President made the short journey across the Seine from the National Assembly in an open top military personnel carrier. The Presidential Cavalry lined the bridge to honour him as he passed rather than accompanying him which they usually do. Following his inspection of the 40 troop divisions lined up around the arena, he installed himself with his guests on the presidential podium and the displays began. Two restored Second World War tanks drove past to mark the 80th anniversary of de Gaulle's wartime *appel* on 18th June 1940 to the free French resistance. More of his key wartime exploits were commemorated with a marching musical display from about 100 individuals representing all branches of the French military in full dress uniform accompanied by short film extracts shown on strategically placed huge screens.

The *Patrouille de France* then flew over emitting red, white and blue flares drenching Concorde in a colourful mist as the air display began with the traditional fly-past of aeroplanes and helicopters. The French Foreign Legion military band then presented a musical marching display demonstrating their diversity for serious military music as well as dance, jazz and pop tunes which earned an enthusiastic round of applause. The massed forces then took the salute lead by the French flag with those of Germany, Austria, Luxembourg and Switzerland behind. Following them came the 40 or so phalanxes of military personnel (eight rows of six abreast more or less observing social distancing criteria) coming from all three principal services (army, navy & air force) as well as training schools, police and fire departments, there was even a cohort from the customs service bringing up the rear.

The finale involved more marching bands and the arrival of Health Service workers to long applause before a gigantic tricolour flag was unfurled. The two hour ceremony finished as it began with singing of the *Marseillaise*, this time by a military male voice choir, as colours were drooped. With perfect timing after the anthem, the *Patrouille de France* flew over again letting off more red, white and blue flares as the applause rang out in thanks for the dedicated work

during the last five months of all Health Service workers. The President then thanked them all individually before donning his own face mask to go walkabout amongst his guests, refer link to view the whole ceremony : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qypt1qngN88>

The TV microphones picked up several of his conversations in perfect English with some of his foreign guests but also with more humble guests representing the many essential services that have worked through the lockdown to keep the country running. One lady guest subsequently singled out by the media for an interview was a supermarket cashier (or as she preferred the more elegant job description of “checkout hostess”), but no less important in the eyes of the President who had ensured that many such essential workers were invited. Significant pay rises sanctioned by the government for medical workers just days before the holiday has done a lot to ensure everyone was smiling at the parade.

Two hours later, Mr Macron, safely back in the *Elysée Palace*, gave the customary one hour presidential interview to two hard hitting journalists from the principal TV channels. This annual probing interview helps to provide replies to the key questions on the public’s mind. The traditional 14th July afternoon garden party at the *Elysée Palace* was cancelled by President Sarkozy back in 2010 due to the austerity measures left behind after the 2008 economic crisis and has never been reinstated. It was certainly not on this year’s agenda for both medical and economic reasons. What was on the agenda to complete the national holiday was the traditional free evening Paris Concert held this year without the public on a specially constructed stage in the *Champs de Mars* in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower.

Two hours of classical music broadcast on the national TV channel France 2 were played by the French National Orchestra conducted by the South Korean Eun Sun Kim who has been named as the next musical director of the San Francisco Opera from 1st August 2021. A star studded cast of soloists included a pianist, a violinist, a cellist, a lady trumpeter as well as several opera singers. The concert was followed by a magnificent 35 minute firework display centred on the Eiffel Tower though again without the normal huge crowds. This was much appreciated as local firework displays had generally been cancelled across the country in recognition of the limits on large gatherings. All in all, a strange day but under the particular circumstances, a highly successful celebration of the national holiday, refer link : <https://www.france.tv/spectacles-et-culture/opera-et-musique-classique/1812891-le-concert-de-paris-2020.html>

So much for last week. This week saw the introduction of compulsory wearing of face masks in public and confined spaces from yesterday (Monday 20th July) with a 135€ fine liable for non-compliance. Already compulsory in public transport, the ruling now applies to all shops and supermarkets as well as cinemas, amusement parks, museums and public buildings. In restaurants and bars, my understanding is that face masks have to be worn when arriving, leaving or moving around, (such as going to the toilet) but when actually seated at table, it is permissible to remove the mask, which I suppose makes eating and drinking a bit easier. The waiters and waitresses are obliged to keep their masks on at all times.

We went out to a local restaurant a couple of weeks ago for the first time since before lockdown and were impressed by the menu system which had been put on line activated by a bar code stuck to the table, thus avoiding the need to touch and use a paper version. Of course it helps to be accompanied by one's offspring who carry the necessary smart phone app to make it all work.

Today's main news is the European budget approval for an enormous 750 billion €uro mix of loans and grants to help the 27 member states with their economic survival which remains a pressing issue, to say the least, everywhere. It is the largest ever borrowing arrangement approved by the EU and its principal beneficiaries are likely to be Italy and Spain, two of the hardest hit countries across the bloc. The package still needs to be ratified by the European Parliament and will require stringent safeguards to prevent misuse of any funds following detailed due diligence on applications from members. The media would have us believe that marathon talks lasting over 90 hours finally achieved a consensus but there appears to be much misgiving about the generosity of the package.

Like previous such arrangements, they are generally for the benefit of the southern countries and funded by the northern countries who themselves now have serious economic difficulties following the pandemic. The final agreement reached a compromise to limit the grant aspect to 390 billion €uros when France in particular initially proposed a grant availability of 500 billion €uros. This appeared to be the sticking point and in particular, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Austria and the Netherlands strongly opposed this amount considering it far too generous. Spain & Italy on the other hand were adamant that at least 400 billion €uros should be allocated as grants which lead to acrimonious exchanges and heated debate.

In the end, compromise was achieved but each member now has the difficulty of justifying their contribution share to their respective governments. From a French perspective, it seems ironic that Mr Macron should wish to appear so generous with his country's finances when he has not insignificant financial difficulties at home. With this level of financial aid packages, the EU must certainly be missing the financial muscle that the UK used to wield. But whatever the infighting, at least this will no longer be a problem for the UK to worry about, one assumes.

The quarantine restrictions here remain similar to those reported before. Cross border travel between France and its neighbours is permitted without any quarantine as is travel to and from the UK whilst reciprocal arrangements continue. On Eurostar a form has to be completed by all travellers to confirm where the passenger will be staying in case Eurostar needs to contact them.

Travel to and from most countries outside the EU remains restricted unless arrangements have been agreed. In any case, all passengers need an up to date Covid-19 negative test result to board a flight. I went for routine blood test last week and had to queue for an hour just to get to the laboratory check in counter which has never happened before. When finally it was my turn, I was dealt with immediately as I was the only one queuing for a blood test, apparently everyone else was there for a Covid-19 test because they wanted to fly somewhere on holiday.

Everyone has different priorities so it is not reasonable to judge others too hastily, it is quite possible that many with whom I shared the laboratory queue just wanted to get back to their

home countries in Algeria or Morocco or Tunisia, there are many immigrant workers living in the suburbs around Paris. From a personal perspective, we shall not be going far, if anywhere, on holiday this year and we certainly shan't be getting on a train or a plane to get there.

The principal long haul tourist destinations like USA and Asia remain closed for tourists in both directions, resulting in a drastic fall in revenue for the French travel and hospitality sector which is in dire trouble and in great need of government funding. Employment in other sectors is also extremely tenuous as the economy struggles to get back on its feet and massive unemployment is forecast in manufacturing and retail as few people now have spare money to spend and industry can't find buyers for their products. It is obviously going to take many years to recover from this disaster as the current GDP growth rate is slumped at -5.3% with an unemployment rate at nearly 8%. This is expected to top 11% later this year before easing in the early part of 2021. The GDP growth rate is not expected to return into positive figures before early 2021.

One minor bit of good news, at any rate if you are a sports fan, is that the first professional football game since lockdown finished will be played in France this coming Friday evening on 24th July. It is the final of the French Cup between Paris Saint Germain (who have won the last five editions) and Saint Etienne, a repeat of the 1982 final. Unlike in UK where professional football continued after lockdown behind closed doors, up to 5 000 supporters will be allowed to enter the *Stade de France* to watch the match whilst observing strict social distancing and adhering to sanitary measures. No doubt the 81 000 seat stadium will still look relatively empty with only 5 000 suitably spaced spectators inside but it is a first step to getting back to a new normal.

The next major sporting event in France at the end of August will be the three week cycle race *Tour de France*. It remains to be seen how this "free to view" event will be managed, a bit difficult to keep riders in sanitary bubbles when they are cycling along public roads.

Cricket is not popular in France, probably only expat Brits and a few Indians actually play the game here, but fortunately I can pick up BBC long wave radio so can tune into Test Match Special to hear how the current series against the West Indies is progressing. Now poised at one match all, there is all to play for in the final test this coming weekend.

The France figures for Covid-19 up to the end of today (21st July 2020) with daily increase / decrease are as follows :

- total confirmed cases : 177 338 (increase of 584)
- total cumulative deaths : 30 165 (decrease of 12)

In hospitals :

- hospitalised : 6 482 (decrease of 107)
- new patients hospitalised : 109 (decrease of 28)
- returned home : 79 734 (increase of 193)
- in intensive care : 455 (decrease of 12)
- new patients in intensive care : 12 (decrease of 6)
- died in hospital : 19 649 (increase of 13)

In care homes & elsewhere :

- confirmed cases : 39 554 (increase of 90)
- died : 10 516 (decrease of 25)

Source 21.07.20 : <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees>

The various graphs indicate a continued decline across all results in France since the peaks between the end of March and the middle of April. Whilst the figures demonstrate the epidemic in France is clearly under control and stable, the government continues to warn the population that the virus is still circulating and the new obligation to wear face masks confirms it.

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. Although these don't precisely tally with the French government statistics, they do allow a simplified comparison between countries assuming the figures have corresponding levels of inaccuracy.

It is perhaps not within the scope of this newsletter to report on the trials and tribulations elsewhere as it is so depressing anyway but suffice to say the world wide death toll has now passed the six hundred thousand mark to 607 781 deaths resulting from 14 562 550 confirmed cases. USA continues to top both listings with 3.7 million cases and nearly 140 000 deaths. Brazil, India, Russia, South Africa, Peru, Mexico and Chile now have more confirmed cases than any European country though UK remains top of the Europe list with just under 300 000 confirmed cases and just over 45 000 deaths.

Europe has now suffered 3 103 674 confirmed cases, 21.3% of the world total down from 26.4% three weeks ago. UK still has the highest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Europe with 295 376 (surprisingly 16 593 less than reported three weeks ago), resulting in the highest number of deaths in Europe with 45 312 (15.3% of cases resulting in death).

This means that, in terms of deaths resulting from Covid-19 infection, UK still has the third highest mortality rate in the world behind USA & Brazil.

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 / 295 376 cases / 45 312 deaths / 15.3% / 68 deaths per 100K
- Spain : 45.7 million / 264 836 cases / 28 422 deaths / 10.7% / 62 deaths per 100K
- Italy : 60.0 million / 244 624 cases / 35 058 deaths / 14.3% / 58 deaths per 100K
- Germany : 81.5 million / 202 345 cases / 9 090 deaths / 4.5% / 11 deaths per 100K
- France : 65.8 million / 166 057 cases / 30 066 deaths / 18.1% / 46 deaths per 100K

The trend in the number of deaths resulting from confirmed cases is dropping slightly in all countries except in UK where it has jumped up 1.3%. France still has the worst record with just over 18% but for the statistic comparing deaths related to population size, UK has by far the

worst record increasing to 68 deaths per 100K. Though, as commented before, not too much should be read into these comparative figures as countries adopt different reporting criteria.

One item of very sad news to pass on is another serious fire in a French gothic cathedral, this time at the St Peter & St Paul Cathedral in Nantes. Last Saturday morning 18th July, fire swept through the nave destroying the organ, shattering the large rose window in the west façade and burning some valuable paintings. Initial findings as to cause point to arson but this remains to be determined. Prime Minister Jean Castex and Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot visited the scene on Saturday afternoon promising adequate funding to ensure a rapid and total reconstruction. A violent baptism by fire for the new government at the end of a week that had begun with so much promise and goodwill.

The conclusion to be drawn from this latest newsletter is perhaps that we can now see some clarity ahead as to where this dreadful pandemic is going whilst all remaining on our guard to limit its continuing spread. This message is proving challenging to get across in some quarters but it is for all of us to lead by example and not leave everything to government imposition.

I have recently enjoyed several zoom sessions with school and sports club contemporaries from 50 years ago and tales they tell from far and wide are often harrowing to hear. Chatting with several old friends who now live in the quieter scenic parts of the USA which have to date not been bothered with any virus issues, their concern now is that holidaymakers from California and New York are coming to their rural states and bringing with them goodness knows what.

The same applies to a friend who since our schooldays in north London has lived in an isolated region in the west of Ireland which is now being overrun by holiday makers from the north and Dublin areas with possible similar consequences. And here in France, this same phenomenon is beginning as described earlier. It is earnestly to be hoped that this worst case scenario of a second surge does not materialise and people understand that each and everyone has their small part to play in avoiding it.

As we now head into the holiday season, whether or not you choose to stay at home or venture out and about, and having already submitted six newsletters which I trust have provided some interesting facts, figures, anecdotes and not too much depressing content, I now feel this would be a good time to set aside my computer keyboard for a while at least. I look forward to learning the outcome of the President's survey and the decision of the Council on the future programme.

It is to be hoped that conditions will permit a restart of the programme in 2021 and meetings and dinners will once again be on the agenda. In the meantime, I wish you all a very happy and healthy summer and as we say over here "*à la rentrée*".

William Powles / IESF BS / 21.07.2020

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