

**"Britain and the World
at Autumn 2009"
Report of a Listening Post held
in London on 7 October**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1. The group was temporarily broken up in smaller sub-groups and subsequently these sub-groups later reported their identifiable topics to the original large group. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

1. Trust, greed, leadership and the impression of 'leaky boundaries'

Group members seemed particularly preoccupied with the current state of the national economy and the long-term ramifications on society. In regards to the latter, participants were concerned with the rising national debt whose figures are becoming so large that it's "hard to get your head around" them as well as with dealing with a worsening situation that feels as if it is "out of our hands". While reflecting on this, the discussion soon turned to the question of "who is to blame, bankers or politicians?" At this point the discussion focused on the greed exhibited by bankers and to insufficient political leadership and how these two were seen as colluding with one another. The members reported feelings of deflation and disappointment that two of society's large institutions (banks and government) proved so untrustworthy. It is almost as if the figures who were to assume leadership seem to have jointly decided to pass on the responsibility of their position and try to save themselves, leaving the participants to wonder "who is going to bail us out?"

2. Absence, roles without substance and distance

The members reflected on the lack of true meaning in public roles such as 'politician', 'banker' and 'reflective citizen'. It felt that such roles are experienced as empty of significance, an observation which was later associated with both the lack of citizen participation in the public domain as well as this Listening Post's small membership. It felt like the lack of responsibility and trust, discussed previously, gave rise to a "why bother?" attitude which is further reinforced by media representations of crises that are continuously coming and going (such as, bird flu, swine flu, terrorism, economic meltdown, etc.) This constant succession of 'critical events' was felt as having a desensitising effect on society which seems to be taken over by a compulsion to be constantly preoccupied with such mini-crises.

3. Hope and anticipation of change

Lastly, although this theme was not explicitly voiced by group members it took over a considerable part of the discussion manifesting itself through a debate on the potential for change by a change (of parties) in government. In that sense, voting was discussed as a 'hope to make a difference.' At the same time the group also considered the recent political developments in the US, the election of Barack Obama and how the sense of hope that carried him to power seems to be gradually fading out.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the data gathered from Parts I and II, with the aim to collectively identify the underlying dynamics – conscious and unconscious – that may be predominant at the time of the group meeting. As well as developing hypotheses as why they might be occurring at the moment. As such at this point the members are working with their 'psychological' or 'internal' world.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

There was a strong sense in the group that the prolonged preoccupation with inadequate leadership and the anger expressed at their perceived failings was connected with being in an uncomfortable situation or environment and wishing automatic, effortless release. As a member put it, referring to an earlier association of nurseries and baby nappies, "how do we deal with shit? Get dirty or throw it away?" At the same time, the image of a leaky nappy also brought to the surface anxieties connected with lack of containment and fears of uncontrollable, fragmented states. The porosity of boundaries was also connected to the loosening up of state boundaries and borders, the free movement of people and the continuous psychological impact of globalisation. These kinds of processes of liberation and change are felt as threatening to our personal and national boundaries making increasingly "hard to get [our] head around" to who we are.

Hypothesis:

The rapid, almost uncontrollable, worsening of the economy and rise of national debt seemed to have stirred up anxieties regarding the continuous national and social changes that have been taking place for several years due to globalisation. The experience of such anxieties is felt as particularly overwhelming because of the lack of identity-formation mechanisms for a society in-transit. A perceived 'psychological contract' has been violated. In the absence of new boundaries or good enough leadership members of society resort to a 'displacing game' where political and financial leaders are perceived as both our condemners as well as our saviours.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

Keeping the above analysis and hypothesis in mind, group discussion also brought to the surface a preoccupation with absence of meaning and human relationships and the felt emptiness of old structures and representations. It seems that at the same time that society is frantically looking for leading figures to blame there is also a momentary, painful realisation that this will not deliver the wished-for benefits. After all, some bankers are in fact "old schoolmates of ours" and new, promising leaders observed closely resemble "paper cut-outs". Reflective realisations such as these appear to be very distant indeed in an environment of constant, successive crises.

Hypothesis:

Society seems to be yearning for a safe, holding environment that will allow exploration and reinvention of old roles, structures and representations. As that need is not met members of society are defending against mounting feelings of insecurity by creating a false illusion of control which manifests itself in the successive creation and termination of mini-crises. A defensive manoeuvre which incidentally only serves to increase the feelings of living within an increasingly uncertain and insecure environment.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3***Analysis:***

The lack of explicit references to hope but its distinct presence through the prolonged discussions on the gradual emergence of a clear political alternative, might bear witness to its yet weak but palpable existence. This, literally, silent hope seems to be situated particularly close to a sense of ambivalence (“do we actually need and want charismatic leaders?”) regarding its actual outcome or manifestation which awakes past failings and disappointments (“Tony Blair had oratory charisma [and look what happened there]”). In circumstances such as these group members suggested that maybe what is to be hoped for is not charisma but accountability.

Hypothesis:

Due to the uncertain and uncontainable social environment that members of society find themselves in, there seems to be a gradual rise of a kind of messianic hope for opposing political leaders arriving and ‘making a difference’. And all because of their charisma and natural abilities, absolving society of any participation and responsibility of what may come. Instead of pursuing the reinforcement of citizen accountability and the space to be reflective, society might be in the process of being lured into a failed cycle of exaggerated hope and devastating disappointment (“it’s almost like 1997 all over again”).

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