

**"Britain and the World
at the Dawn of 2005"**
Two Reports of a New Years
Listening Post held on
Wednesday 12th January 2005
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm
College Hall,
University of London,
Malet Street,
London WC1E 7HZ



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

REPORT 1

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

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. As in part one, the focus of members was often either directly or indirectly on the tsunami disaster. The imagery used to identify themes was of being overwhelmed, structures being eroded, and the need for repair. There was a sense of bewilderment and a search for meaning running through the discussion. A number of themes were identified, and these seemed to fall into three main themes.

a) Helplessness, Trust and Responsibility

There was a strong feeling of boundaries being broken, the erosion of social structures and feelings of being overwhelmed by uncertainty. There was a sense of being 'swept along by the current'. These feelings were not immediately associated with the tsunami, but the disaster provided imagery to describe feelings about the current trends in society. There was a feeling amongst members that we need new social institutions to help us manage or contain these feelings. The government was over-regulating because citizens were not to be trusted to take appropriate responsibility.

b) Withdrawal from Unbearable Reality

Symbolised by the expression 'the grass is not greener on the other side', there was a feeling that society was increasingly failing to maintain a sense of what was 'decent'. Religious fundamentalism was experienced as the 'barbarian without', but there were also barbarians within -both our own society and within ourselves. The tsunami is a metaphor for cataclysmic breakdown of civil society. There is a shift in the boundary between what is public and what is private. An example was given of a group of youths on a tube train who were experienced as intimidating, and one of whom hit a woman

passenger before jumping off the train. In contrast, the film 'Vera Drake' was offered as an example of a sense of decency that was now lost. There was a strong sense of wishing to escape from these unpleasant realities, but a belief or realisation that this was not possible.

c) Ambivalence, Guilt and Reparation

The tsunami disaster has generated feelings of despair and helplessness amongst some members, but in others there was a wish to act positively or to look for hope. This was at first considered as the optimism of youth and the pessimism of maturity, but it was then acknowledged that both sets of feelings were present in all members. The reparative impulse was expressed in a number of ways: one member talked of her strong urge to have children; another wondered if the high turnout at the Listening Post was reparative. This theme included the struggle to take up personal authority in the context of crisis and uncertainty, and to begin to face up to our global responsibilities, particularly in relation to climate change.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

There was a realisation in this session that even when members were apparently discussing other issues, the tsunami disaster figured in the choice of words and imagery. The events in Asia were deeply shocking, and forced members into primitive emotional states, defences against these states, and thinking based on anxieties associated with death and survival.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Rage associated with helplessness is projected into 'the other'

Analysis:

The session began with an attempt to understand the feelings of uncertainty and confusion amongst members. It seemed that the youngest member held on to an optimistic view of the future, whilst others took up a more pessimistic position. It seemed almost impossible to hold a balanced position which acknowledged both sets of feelings. The sense that anything was permissible had created a kind of barbarism, with decency disappearing. There was a fundamentalist backlash to permissiveness, in which nothing is permitted outside of a narrow doctrine. The confusion surrounding social rules has left us not knowing what to think, and not knowing how to act. The feelings of rage and helplessness are unbearable and are projected into others. The youths on the tube train were black, and the passenger who was hit was white. They could be seen as giving their own pain and rage to others by this apparently barbarous act. One member noted that outrage and cynicism were ways of defending ourselves against the power of our

own rage, which we had located in others. At the same time, rage was held in check by feelings of impotence and confusion.

Hypothesis:

There is currently a profound sense of uncertainty in society about socially acceptable behaviour, norms and values. The boundaries of decency are blurred, and there is no consensus about what is permissible and what is not. As a result we are filled with rage and hurt which we project into marginalised groups we then perceive as 'barbarians' who carry the blame for social erosion. However this process leaves us depleted and uncertain how to act.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Denial fails as a defence and leads to flight

Analysis: The tsunami evoked a terror in members of the enormity of potential violence and loss. Nothing is certain, and anything is possible. The beach and the seashore were symbols of safety and pleasure, of families enjoying holidays. Now, the beach is unsafe, unpredictable. The sea can engulf us, and we are forcibly reminded of our own vulnerability. The fishermen of Thailand are afraid to return to the sea and passengers may be afraid to use the tube, for fear of potential violence and destruction. One member observed that damaged adolescents only come to our notice when they attack us, or people like us. We acknowledged that the violence we see outside ourselves also exists as a significant element of our own inner worlds. We are usually able to deny this reality as we are cocooned in our privileged environment. The tsunami has demonstrated that our elaborate defences, both physical and psychological, can be violently destroyed by uncontrollable natural forces. These extreme circumstances have resulted in a variety of flight mechanisms being mobilised. For example, the wish to escape from the city to the country, and a retreat into introspection and away from action, can be seen as manifestations of flight responses as experienced by members.

Hypothesis: We live in a society that is normally safe from overwhelming events, and are able to deny the reality of our precarious existence. Because of the tsunami disaster the denial of death as a defence against reality of our existence has been replaced by a flight into introspection and pessimism.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Taking responsibility in an uncertain world

Analysis: In considering how we have managed our own smaller scale disasters, such as the flooding in Carlisle and the recent pumping of sewage into the Thames, we began to think about how the government micro-manages risk, and how we have handed over this responsibility to the authorities. We reflected on the fact that some forest dwellers had gone inland before the tsunami, and how western tourists had been completely unaware of danger until it was too late. We have lost our ability to trust each other, and to trust ourselves, and we need to rediscover our creative interdependence. We felt that there was some reassurance in realising that we all share the same world, and are all part of the whole. Demonstrations of nature's power gives us a new perspective about our own omnipotence, but we find it almost impossible to comprehend the scale of our vulnerability. Our perception is limited and distorted by our cynicism, and refusal to

accept the extent of our vulnerability. We cannot free ourselves completely from these illusions, and continue to struggle to take more responsibility for ourselves. The barbarian part of all of us is nearer the surface.

Hypothesis: The confrontation with global disaster has shaken our comfortable defences, and has made us more aware of our privileged position in the world, and the responsibilities which follow. Because of this new perspective, our reparative powers have been awakened as we attempt to respond positively to the damage we see around us.

Convener: Andrew Collie

REPORT 2

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

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. On this occasion, all themes centred on the Asian disaster but were beginning to take the thinking beyond this to an understanding of what it was saying about society in general. Themes were not specific but have been drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

a) *Potency and impotency*

It was felt that giving made us feel potent but that evil made us feel impotent. There were the beginnings of an inevitable return to impotency, people were looking for blame and viruses and paedophilia were infecting the event. It was questioned whether the television screen was being used by us to screen the disgust at the smell and to preserve our feelings of potency. There was a sense of potency that modern technology permits ordinary people to tell and show the world the shocking and awful truth of the disaster. But there is also a sense of impotency concerning the disbelief of media reportage.

b) *Guilt*

There was a feeling that we were alright and not affected and a sense of relief from

giving. There was a need to connect to the event to make meaning and to make sense out of it but it was too painful. The disaster being a neutral issue provided a means of escape; an opportunity to trust; an opportunity to feel good. There was a sense of guilt that we were using the disaster in many ways as an escape, vehicle for displacement, or avoidance of many things that we found uncomfortable in our everyday lives.

c) Good and evil

The disaster raised the issue of power and corruption. There was concern at the arrogance of the Western world. Members asked 'what were we doing'? In Iraq we got rid of a morally wrong leader. But how do we decide what is right and wrong? In regard to the disaster members asked, 'why should we give to foreigners'? Is it shameful or shameless? Is this genuine benevolence and goodness or simply a displacement of our own fears and sense of victimisation as a means of improving our own self-esteem. Is payment simply a means of keeping the Gods quiet.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

At a conscious level the Asian disaster had clearly made a considerable impact on the thinking and emotions of the members which is a clear reflection on society in general. Not surprisingly this dominated the entire Listening Post process. However, in their lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience the members realised that at the psychological level there were other significant societal dynamics at play and these are reflected in the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Displacement of own victim status onto disaster victims.

Analysis: Part three commenced with a reflection on 'how long we can sustain our empathy' and a consideration of 'other things that are happening in the world'. It was felt that society experienced the world as such a dire place at this time. Examples such as Iraq, Darfur, rapes in Africa, global warming, all talked to the sort of experiences as also did references to a rapidly changing world. It was felt that because of the experience of trying to live with this awful world the Asian disaster had provided an opportunity to escape from the everyday unbearable thoughts and feelings and to engage in the excitement of the disaster and of the unbridled pleasure of being presented with a 'no blame' situation where we can be generous. One member described the disaster as 'It's sexy'; and we were pleased to see different people from all over the world coming together in such a creative, cooperative and positive manner. A hope existed that this would lead to an owning of guilt and to resulting in reparation. Another member said, 'I've enjoyed it, I can watch and not feel any responsibility'. It was likened to the outpouring at the death of Princess Diana. And it was likened to the 'glorious days of the 1940's' after World War Two. It was experienced as like the lifting of a dark veil

permitting sunlight to enter our world again. But it was also appreciated that this was but an escape from the realities and extreme difficulties of everyday life. Issues of power and corruption were raised. Indonesia had been labelled the fifth most corrupt country in the World. It was realised that the scandals would soon return. And one member very emotionally reminded us that after the initial post-war celebrations we then had to come to terms with the horrors of the war. It served as a reminder that we would soon have to return to the horrors of the current societal dynamics from which we had so eagerly escaped.

Hypothesis: Because society is currently experienced as such an awful place the Asian disaster has provided us with an opportunity to displace our feelings of victimisation onto the victims in Asia. For a short while members of society are able to forget their own considerable anxieties but they are very aware that like the celebrations at the end of World War Two the horrors will soon return and will have to be faced up to. Members of society will need to take back their projections and live with the consequences.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Good and Evil: Opposites existing in parallel.

Analysis: It was accepted that there was a very clear and genuine sense of the whole world being empathetic and wishing to respond to this disaster in any way they could. This reflected the vast amounts of money contributed by individuals in many nations throughout the world and the emergency work of the aid agencies. However, on reflection there were frequent expressions of our guilt regarding the Asian disaster. Many issues were raised that caused us to doubt our unquestioned generosity. Were we seeking to pay them off (Asian peoples) for the way we treat them as third world countries? Were we seeking to pay the Gods to keep them quiet and stop them revisiting us with such evil? Were we really interested in changing things in the third world or were we intent on preserving the status quo? Was Gordon Brown's visit to Africa a real opportunity to make any difference? There was a consideration that power and corruption might result in the monies not going to those most needy. That really, third world countries don't look after themselves. That since for example the Portuguese moved out of their colonies the infrastructure had been allowed to collapse. That if, as the Angolan's did with when they took control of De Beers, they could manage themselves more effectively. It was as if through our payments we were able to put on a mask that kept out the reek of death and rotting bodies. We have erected a wall that is sound proof and stops us hearing the plight of the third world. By our benevolent actions we screen ourselves from the realities and unbearably painful thoughts and feelings about the third world. We are left with our feelings of guilt and an awareness that one day we shall have to face the consequences.

Hypothesis: At one level members of society identify with victims of the Asian disaster and respond with great goodness and benevolence especially at a personal level. However, at a mainly unconscious level we are aware that we treat so-called Third World countries in an unfair and unequal manner. This provides society with a darker more evil motivation for giving. Because of our feelings of guilt associated with this behaviour; and perhaps fear of reprisals by those countries, we seek to satisfy our guilt and fears by paying off those concerned. In the short term members of society may satisfy their emotions but in the longer term they will be left with the original problem.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3 *Impotence and Dependency.*

Analysis: There were frequent references to death and to fears that terrible things were going to happen. One member questioned whether our existence on earth would make any difference in the long term or whether the results of our lives were going to be washed up on the shore like so much debris. Thoughts were around as to whether we can protect ourselves from dangers perceived or real. For example, references to spiked drinks in bars, was the victim also assaulted? What can we do to escape from the world as we currently experience it? There was a general feeling and expression of impotence and a resulting dependency. It was suggested that we abrogate our responsibility in several ways. We seek dependency in God and other religious beliefs. We seek dependency in scientists. For example Einstein was quoted as saying 'there's nothing wrong with not knowing'. When dependency fails, when God fails to protect us, we then seek to blame God for not living up to our omnipotent phantasy. In like manner we seek to blame scientists who fail to warn us of impending disasters and at another level for the problems associated with progress. But members felt that such disasters also had the beneficial effect of helping us to realise that life is difficult and that a reflective stance helped us to begin to gain an understanding of complex issues.

Hypothesis: Because our world is experienced in such a negative manner as described in Hypothesis (1) members of society are left with strong feelings of impotence and this in turn leads to a yearning for dependency in the shape of the good, nurturing and loving mother. The Asian disaster serves as a reminder of that impotency and that dependency and relatedness to a phantasied omnipotent being is frequently an illusion. Members of society are left struggling to make sense of our world but that struggle is of the greatest value.

Convener: Dr Lionel F Stapley