

**"USA and the World  
at the Dawn of 2005"  
Report of a Listening Post  
held on Tuesday 11th January**



**Encouraging The Reflective Citizen**

**Part 1. SHARING 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, neighborhood or voluntary or leisure organizations, or as members of families and communities. The event took place shortly before George W. Bush will be inaugurated for his second term, after a particularly long and contentious election season, a year in which the news was filled with reports of the ongoing war in Iraq, genocide in Sudan and two weeks after the devastating tsunami in South Asia, much of the discussion focused on the dialectic between the internal and the external, out of which the other themes emerged.

**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, themes seemed to be inter-related and very much connected to the outcome of recent presidential elections (and upcoming inauguration), which weighed heavily on participants' minds, and expressed in terms of polarities-the public vs. the private (or internal/external), hope/despair, red/blue, expressing the divisions in this country.

1. *Private vs. public sphere:* Participants feel acutely aware of national and global events, and yet are pulling back from public involvement to focus on what's closer to home-what can be touched. There was a wish to be involved, but with less intensity, and closer to home where one can have an impact. Others feel more compelled to speak out in the public sphere in the aftermath of the presidential elections.
2. *Hope vs. despair:* Participants feel despair when contemplating the implications of the presidential election results. Those in the older generations expressed more despair, while the youngest gen-xer expressed more hope. There were a number of references to death - on a personal level, as well as a political one - recognition of one's mortality, as well as seeing the death of cherished programs and ideals. At the same time, the elections were so close. The closeness of the elections gave some heart. More people than in any other presidential election voted for Bush. At the same time he was elected by the smallest percentage ever.

3. This country is deeply divided, as expressed in various post-election maps depicting states as either red or blue. We live in an adversarial culture. There are many progressives who live in red states as well as conservatives living in red ones. In fact, we have more purple states than blue or red states. There is concern about the current political discourse on the role of government. It feels as though there is an opposition to looking at the common wealth or the common good, as programs of the New Deal have been decimated.

### 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. This was a small and relatively homogeneous group of people in the sense that we were 5 white women, politically progressive and all involved in change/education work. In terms of our differences, we spanned three generations, were married and single, childless and with children and grandchildren. All of the members participated in the Listening Post last year. Some concerns were expressed that the (published) OPUS report last year on the World at the Dawn of 2004 represented Americans as being out of touch and did not adequately reflect our group's political disillusionment. One questioned whether it was possible to create a unified field theory to explain so many divergent perspectives and suggested that this perspective is rooted in western colonialist ideology. This analysis has been distilled into the following interrelated hypotheses:

#### Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

**Analysis:** Participants are acutely aware of events on the national and global scene. The outcome of the November elections, and the impact that will have in terms of national policy, weigh heavily on participants minds. A number of members have re-focused on issues that are closer to home. As one member put it, "I feel impotent in a way that I am not used to feeling. So, I attempt to work in small concentric circles around me - rather than the big stuff. I feel drained. There's still altruism, but it's focused in a different place." And another: "my attention is not as intense as before - if I have to apportion energies, my valence is much more on family responsibilities and more local - that's where I can have more impact. I can stay current with the larger picture, but I can't impact it as much." The drawing inward does not feel like a narcissistic withdrawal, but rather a re-grouping. The group reflected on the enormous public outpouring in the wake of the tsunami in South Asia and what that may mean, given the contrast to how the larger public ignores tragedies closer to home. As one member put it, "What is it that is not dramatic or urgent enough in our own country to draw concern? E.g., hunger in Boston. When it's local and more present, we don't see people and aren't moved to respond in the same way. I am both troubled and fascinated by this (duality/ bifurcation)." What might it take to move the public to the same degree on a local level? How will the baby boomer generation react to changes in social security, which the president promises to overhaul? "I have to face the unpleasant reality that everything I stand for has been violated. But children will continue to pour into schools, and I have to do what I can."

**Hypothesis:** We feel sufficiently daunted by the magnitude of what is going on in the political sphere so that we attempt to work on issues that are closer to home, rather than "the big stuff." We combat our feelings of impotence by trying to make an impact where we feel we can. Our individual pulling back from public life is reflected/paralleled in the larger political debate. The unspoken debate in political discourse is about our responsibility to our individual selves vs. our collective responsibility to each other.

## Analysis and Hypothesis 2

**Analysis:** There were a number of references to death - "I wonder if this will be my last Christmas," and "I will not see the recovery of the New Deal before I die." Perhaps our pulling back has to do with consciousness of our own mortality. There were also references to the death of the earth-concerns about what we are doing to the planet, and threats to arctic wildlife as the Bush administration attempts once again to drill for oil in wilderness areas. The election results are a "deeply sobering reality." Hope can be found in the fact that the election results were so close. Despite the president's claims for a mandate, he won the election by a very small percentage. We also find hope in taking a larger historical perspective, and recognizing that democracy has been at risk at many times in our history, and somehow we have made it through. The pendulum always swings back.

**Hypothesis:** We don't want to face the painful realities in our country: the war in Iraq, the president's re-election, the deep economic and political divisions in this country. We respond by pulling back from public life. We find hope by focusing on local issues, where it feels possible to have an impact.

## Analysis and Hypothesis 3

**Analysis:** We are at historic time around the elections. People feel either elated or despairing about the outcome. Regardless, the impact of the elections will be profound. There is little real dialogue or substantive debate in congress, and we realize that we too are not reaching across the divide. We cannot acknowledge that a bit of George Bush lives in us. We acknowledge our privilege, but separate ourselves from the president's "conscious intent to oppress." John Kerry and George W. Bush came from the same privileged world. How is it possible to deal with that complexity? The participants in this listening post (in the "blue" state of Massachusetts, home of John Kerry) wondered how so many people could vote for Bush when it seemed to go against their own interests. How did the people in Ohio - who lost so many jobs - vote for him - against their own interest? We found ourselves feeling somewhat superior to these others who voted republican, and didn't seem to think things through. It was recognized that somewhere in Colorado or Ohio, there could be 5 equally thoughtful reflective people who are expressing the exact opposite viewpoints that we are.

We looked at our level of education in the US. Citizens are unable to think critically about what's really going on. Political awareness of how we are being used is not being raised in our public schools. In the current political discourse, the complexity of our ideas is not acknowledged or understood. Critical thinking is not rewarded. People are afraid to express their outrage. If people speak out, they will be subject to the tight

machine of suppression. Michael Moore is an example. "The citizenry is not asking enough uncomfortable questions. Why are we in Iraq? It comes back to the questions of asking why. Why reality shows and why now? Who defines reality and why? I'm mistrustful of the media - the lines between journalistic standards of the US media machine and entertainment are blurred - 'infotainment'." There is little or no public debate about the kinds of choices we are making as a nation - cutting back on programs and jobs for youth while increasing bonuses for executives. The business world is complicit with this.

***Hypothesis:*** The level of division in this country reflects our inability to acknowledge or understand complexity. Critical thinking is not rewarded in public life. We have difficulty acknowledging that complexity in ourselves, and take a stance of superiority regarding the other - we democrats say republicans aren't smart, while republicans say democrats are not moral. Like our representatives in Congress, we find it difficult to reach across the aisle to speak with our counterparts on the other side.

Convener: Tracy Wallach