

**"Britain and the World
at the Dawn of 2006"
Report of a Listening Post
held in Birmingham
on 6th February**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

In Part I, participants were invited to share their concerns, preoccupations and experiences arising in their different social roles.

Part II participants identified the major themes arising in Part I.

Theme I: Structure versus No Structure: Regulation and Control versus Chaos and Freedom

The session began with a request for a round of names. One person commented on this as a "generational thing". Conventions of introduction. Observation, that in the Winter of 2006, social conventions have been broken. One person then introduced another.

Another person talked about being familiar with the convention of not introducing herself. However, she had started the evening by getting lost, using the wrong entrance and finding herself in the wrong group. She had experienced a marked sense of displacement, of not being with the right people. The other group's response was "You don't want to get stuck with us". She commented that in unfamiliar structures, we do want to place ourselves.

[Interestingly, the listening post was punctuated at several points by people looking for "their group". Later, a smiling, youngish man entered the room and, without speaking, helped himself to a chair. None of these interruptions aroused any comment.]

The person who had suggested a round of names commented that the social convention of naming seemed more important than what you do. The other "retired" member commented on the use of name badges at conferences. "You have to be named". Another member, working in the NHS, said she was considering retiring. Changes in the NHS seemed so chaotic and overwhelming. Massive changes. Expectations of different groups coming in to do the work. The imposition of apparent order through a salary structure in which everything was comparable. Evoking competitiveness. Lists which were too much to contemplate. Trainings went out of the window in favour of orderly structure.

Another member talked about the proliferation of regulation and the experience that the more something is regulated, the more it has a life, e.g. bullying. This regulation was seen by others as replicated in CAMHS and in education. Ian Huntley was mentioned. There had been regulation but people did not ask questions/wonder. A process got missed out. One that is complicated. Somebody wondered "Is it possible to have human life in organisations?" Belief in that is a bit dented.

Another member felt the need for more regulation to address social and environmental challenges. Regulation was likened to manic control in order to feel we have a grip on something.

About half way through the evening, the clash between free speech and religious belief was commented on. [The publication of the Danish cartoons and subsequent protests were recent events.] Who is doing what to whom. Switching views. Comments about mutual respect, restraint, shared responsibility. In troubled times, the wisdom of speaking out was questioned. A Dutch producer's experience was mentioned in terms of having to be frightened all the time. Someone commented "(It's) really confusing". Individuals had found themselves switching backwards and forwards with their views/responses in relation to recent events. The inflammatory impact of media coverage was noted. It was felt that there had been a gradual return of perspective and the emergence of quieter voices. The question was posed "Is structure a good or bad thing?" "Inflamed or inflammatory." One person had found him/herself thinking about an ageing, retired white population, dependent on an increasingly angry, resentful, ethnically diverse young population. Someone likened this to an inverse pyramid.

Theme 2: Retirement and Work: Avoiding Isolation Death

Following on from a wish for introductions, one person shared his experience of having just retired and going back on a part-time basis. Another "retired" member talked of having had to retire some years ago because of age requirements, but was not retired. She introduced herself in terms of what she does. There was some confusion and misunderstanding in these exchanges. An expectation that retirement is to do with money was mentioned.

A member talked of having spent the last couple of days planning an introduction to a group of business men of what a therapist does. The aim of the meeting was to find business for each other. She had used an updated Hamlet as a case study. She had been shocked at her own response; that Hamlet's story was both so horrendous, but also so ordinary. The violence and the suicide seemed mundane. Hamlet's experience as very frightened and very aggressive. Later there was a comment about young men in today's society as very frightened. Another member shared their experience of attending a peer group of therapists. A paper had been presented about retiring: questions raised were "Does work give life a structure? Would you go mad without it? Does work stop you thinking about death? Associations to work included "making a contribution", potency. The two "retired" members who were not actually retired, discovered they were both attending the same three- sday course on preparing for retirement.

Retirement was seen as a significant point, a rite of passage. A member described meeting an old friend: the narrowing of her life without work, in terms of attitudes, friendships, interests. The member was grateful she can still work. The question was asked "Why should work be our only source of meaning?". Work was seen as putting us in touch with organisations. Work organisations were seen as external and communal. Shared endeavour. Attaches you to a group. Gives you a sense of yourself. Challenges inherent in work included encountering people who were different. Still wedded to idea of work. Of offering service. Regret at all changes was expressed. "Multi-agency tragedy". Competition and rivalry between people was seen as unacknowledged.

Towards the end of Part I a member talked about her aunt, a former headmistress, now in a nursing home, of her vulnerability. She wanted to bring her in. Her aunt's parting comments were "Don't leave me. Don't go". She is near the end of her life. The

background to her visit had been a noisy conflict between Welsh/English Rugby match on Welsh borders. "Lots of boos".

Theme 3: Choice and Change: Real or Illusionary: Progress or Packaging

Change as a form of pastime. In relation to educational strategy meetings play the game as if we understand but nobody understands. Child dressing up in parents' clothing. The task of some meetings was to decide what might enhance the lot of young people. What is simply a re-arrangement. Eyes are on other things. Cannot rely on people choosing well. Individual preferences. Government playing to choice. Sense of environmental emergency. Need for government regulation. Was it being taken seriously? The deadening nature of cultural prescription. How do you decide what to regulate? "Choice thing bonkers". Depression arising from the irrelevance of what we do. World is one big organisation. What we do does not matter. Importance of Brazil and China. Manic controls. Everything hopeless or everything matters.

Recycling. Can we make a difference? Personal principle and bigger picture at odds. Saving plastic bottles for recycling. What was the point? Bloody-mindedness. The chipping away of a sense of personal responsibility.

In work settings, cannot choose. Have to accommodate to others. External challenges.

Would NHS create its own challenges if it was not politically driven? Children who have lost control. Emperor's new clothes. Boundaries - GP in Asda. Choose to see GP anywhere. Someone expressed shock at the idea of selling therapy to businessmen. Global markets. Repackaging of therapy and Hamlet. In NHS and Education, change is always presented as if it is being re-invented. Nobody acknowledges struggles of professionals/their expense/of previous work. No learning from experience.

Part One ended with a member describing how the previous weekend she had gone to look for the Regional Psychotherapy Unit. When asked why, she explained that it is about to be demolished to become part of a super hospital, a super bug. It is to be rehoused in a portakabin. The previous occupants are to be evicted with nowhere to go. [At this point, someone entered the room and removed a chair]. New initiatives. The portakabin of life.

Comment

The Listening Post took place shortly after the London demonstrations against the Danish publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed. Interestingly, most of the contributions in Part I related to individuals' work roles rather than to any other social roles. In particular, there was no contribution from any religious affiliation.

The composition of the group was drawn entirely from people working in helping professions. All the participants were either middle aged or older people.

In Part III, members reflected on the major themes identified in Part II with a view to formulating hypotheses about current underlying dynamics in society.

Hypothesis 1.

Anxieties about Absolution

Concerns were expressed about certainty and absolute beliefs. Initially, this was with respect to the impact on particular groups, e.g. homosexuals, women. Certainty was

seen as a way of denying complexity and of competitiveness. There was a fear of being restricted by others, but also of restricting others. The example of Guantanamo Bay was cited. How western values and western life had, and was, impacting on others' freedom. Someone quoted a poem contrasting living in a place "hard and trampled like a yard" as opposed to being in "doubts and loves rather than certainty". Humour was described as a defence against taking yourself or others too seriously, a legitimate expectation that you would take it on the chin. It was also recognised that humour can be used to legitimate bullying; the victim cannot take a joke. Humour was seen as a defence against absolutism but also as the defence of the bully.

In reflecting on the lack of associations from religious affiliations, it was hypothesised that we might unconsciously have been avoiding conflict and disguising our own fundamentalism and desire for complete power.

A possible hypothesis might be that we fear the restrictions of the beliefs of others, but there is also underlying guilt at the imposition of values and beliefs on others.

Hypothesis 2.

The Loss of Power and Influence

A related hypothesis would be around concerns of the loss of power and influence at different levels, e.g. the global market, our own national politicians or in the work place.

Choice agendas were seen as illusions of power. Repackaging was likened to re-arranging the furniture; it looks different, but really nothing has changed. Repackaging Hamlet brought home the mundaneness of violence and suicide; no longer a Prince of Denmark, but another volatile young man for whom things are so terrible, he or someone else must die. The example was cited of a young Muslim demonstrator, dressed as a suicide bomber, but the next day represented via the media as an apologetic young man surrounded by members of his community. A discussion about bloggers ensued - blogging as a way of finding a voice and a community.

Work for participants had provided a community of like-minded people, a sharing of values, a predominant social role, proving relatedness and connection. On the other hand, it was suggested that work might provide an illusion of choice and control. The loss of work evoked fears of disconnection, meaninglessness, redundancy and death. Repackaging in the world of work (NHS, Education) was seen to diminish significance. People's previous experience and learning from experience were not seen. The value of individual consciousness in the face of environmental threats and global markets was questioned. The meeting of different worlds, the therapeutic and a business club created a sense of shock.

The Emperor's New Clothes was a phrase repeated several times. In the absence of real power and in the loss of influence, it seemed there was a resort to repackaging as an illusion of power. The sense of precariousness in recent events and through the listening post, was commented on.

A second hypothesis might be that, faced with the loss of real power and influence, politicians and organisations resort to choice, and change agendas as a defence against the experience of powerlessness.