

"Canada and the World
at the Dawn of 2006"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 11th January



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. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the social context of participants. The discussion was wide ranging and a variety of areas were discussed and topics raised.

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 were difficult to name but can be drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

(a) Health and Aging: Members of the group discussed their private concerns about aging and increasing health issues as a growing factor in their lives. This may be a consequence of this group meeting for a second time at crucial points in their own lives. More of the group have suffered illnesses and/or retired from their work.

(b) Political and social destabilization. The recognition that more political and social structures have become destabilized over the last decade despite relative prosperity. Health care systems seem not to satisfy, universities seem to lose their integrity, education systems seem to be more dysfunctional. Yet many in the room are not uncomfortable in such environments.

(c) The failure of expertise. Social science seems to have become less able to achieve meaningful understanding of these various difficulties. There seems to be emerging a view that understanding complexity is the wave of the future. Though there is also little understanding of what this means. Just as in 2004 A series of distinctions were made between some deep conflicts: Data and understanding; Palestinians and Israelis; Rich and poor countries; Progress and No Change; Personal, local and global.

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 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 internal world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions

towards them. Again, there was a lack of clear, easily identifiable issues but there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

There were two major hypotheses, firstly that these concerns and differences were part of an emerging notion of the differences between their own relative comfort despite their age and the situation of the much younger populations in poor nations of the world. One said that the alternative to growing old was less palatable. They did recognize the differences between their situation and its difficulties and those of other populations. They were concerns of older people who are struggling to assimilate the change occurring in their lives and in the society around them. The second hypothesis was that relative instability around them was perceived because they themselves seemed to be immune to its most difficult effects so far.

Analysis: It was the view that society was faced with increased destabilization, much of it based far away from Canada. This period remains coupled with a powerful sense of inequality in the world and feelings of guilt about our relative prosperity and level of security. This in turn is tied to a sense of foreboding about what must lie ahead in our own lives, aging deterioration and death. Moreover it is not clear what we can do about this personally and politically.

Hypothesis: An aging society will settle on a notion of democracy that secures its own comfort as it ages. It recognizes emerging destabilization, but hopes to avoid its personal consequences. The very notion of progress is at risk, because reductions in inequalities in a newly defined democracy will inevitably result in loss. Much of our confusion is a result of this fear of loss.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

That these concerns were part of the process of aging being undergone by the most vocal of our company. They were concerns of older people who are struggling to assimilate the change occurring in their lives and in the society around them.

Analysis: The members reflected on the impossibility of understanding each other across the differences of culture and socio-economic inequality. They also felt a continuing sense of impotence in the face of destabilized social and political environments. Some of the international conflict and lack of understanding was reflected in a kind of generational opacity. Some members of the group felt that little had really changed but that old innovations had reappeared in new guises that had become hard to deal with. Others felt that there was nothing that they could do that would have any effect in the broader world. One went so far as to feel that the kind of discussion was so speculative and removed from the reality of our day-to-day lives as to be something like talk about sports.

Hypothesis: Some members of this aging group of people have begun to recognize their own mortality. The group contained both older and younger people with very different views. For the older group there was both a growing complacency about their own

security in the face of the uncertainties faced by the younger members. This was not unrelated to a dread of their own period of aging and death. They accepted that some new ways of thinking were beyond their capacity and would come to fruition for later generations. For the younger members there was a sense that they were preparing with some optimism to explore new approaches despite the instability and uncertainty they now faced.

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