

**"Ireland 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 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 concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Issues to do with feelings of difference emerged quickly. Participants spoke about the search for commonality in the face of clear differences. Changes in identity in work role related to organisational changes, changes in life/family role to do with age were discussed. Participants connected around themes of connectedness and identity: Ireland is still familiar but also completely different. There was recognition of the experience of being in 'a familiar environment but a very different space'. Within this changed space, there were questions about where 'home' is now. Uncertainty about where I now fit or belong were common. Some members recognised this as old and familiar from childhood: not fitting in for a range of reasons. Who now knows the way around this new Ireland? In finding the venue, one member had the experience of helpful and warm assistance: another approached the 'hyphenated Irish' (Polish-Irish; African-Irish) who were not able to help.

Members spoke about older generations and the difference in our experience of a sense of place or a sense of belonging. The tendency to nostalgia about 'the good old days' was challenged by a reminder that the good old days were not all that good for many people in Ireland and that the experience of feeling estranged from the mainstream is not a new one. At the same time, there was reference to being an exile without having gone away and a line from a poem was quoted about 'my own hearth growing slowly alien'.

There was a strong sense of the importance of personal contact, within organisations, communities and society. There was a feeling that this was at risk and that there is a loss of contact with each other. Technology seems to have increased the urgency, frequency and range of communications but reduced face to face engagement.

Laughter now seems to be missing from our lives, especially in work settings: it does not seem 'proper' to have a real laugh with each other and we are struck when we hear laughter out loud, in a building with many people. Work has a sense of heaviness about it and lightness is not approved of. Where has the laughter gone? Is this the sanitising effect of technology? Or has this to do with increased awareness of and attention to privacy and private space, so that even public laughter is seen as an invasion of space?

There is a sense that privacy is now linked to affluence: there is evidence that space in rural Ireland is now used for urban people to buy privacy. The increased evidence of separation and defence (electronic gates on ordinary houses, house and car alarms), protection and privacy, is in contradiction with the desire for more connection with each other.

The ease of entering Ireland was contrasted with the experience of entering the UK which is now like entering a fortress. Feelings of being under surveillance are common in the UK. Members noted that in Ireland, we are strengthening the boundaries around our domestic space but not around our national space. There was a sense that the importance of the land, of owning your own home, is linked to the Irish experience of the Famine, from which we get our strong focus on tenure and security. There was sadness at the idea of family farms being sold for golf courses.

Members associated with the idea of the 'amphibious home' designed after flooding. Members were attracted by the notion of working with what you have.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

'In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1'. Members noted that the identification and discussion of themes tended to be polarised: 'connection versus disconnection' and that the exploration of the grey middle ground is more interesting than the black and white extremes. It was noted that there was little comment on the decline of institutions, the separation of church and state. Several themes identified by members have been distilled into three major themes:

1. Disconnection resulting in a loss of identity (Space: Place: Displace)

The sense of self, of 'my take on the world' is validated when I am able to say 'I am from here'. The sense of place is linked to my recognition and acceptance of who I am. Some reference points that seemed fixed are no longer there: some are not in the place they were. That which was constant is no longer. Family, environment, work are all changing.

Identity and place are still linked, but linked in different ways. We are unable to rely on continuity of identity, it has to be constructed and reconstructed. A crisis is an event that makes you question your identity and belonging. Identity now constructed by being received - an increased regulation of identity. There are now terms that are acceptable to describe identity and others are not, reflecting a global move towards standardisation and conformity in which 'standing out' is both admired and stamped out - a move towards blandness. My identity is constantly being created in my connectedness - can't see identity as something static. The desire and the need to make connections is about the need to create and assert identity. I discover who I am in relation to others.

In the past in Ireland, you could look the same but know you were different. Now, there are lots of people who are not 'the same'. There is a need to revisit what is constant, what is grounded. When I am in danger of being swallowed, I want to become 'us'. Notice the current focus on public personalities 'discovering themselves' in public, on TV - asking 'who are you?'

There are no longer regional Irish accents. We increasingly reserve our difference and distinctiveness. Curiosity about others is now a taboo, resulting in dialogue which is risk-

free. Anxieties are aroused by not being acknowledged as a person. Personal boundaries are not clear, so people are much more tentative about boundaries. Political correctness has replaced human contact.

2. Change

Change is everywhere and in all parts of our lives. Religion was a place to put uncertainties. Now that religion has been displaced, we locate and express our uncertainties in a range of ways. Institutions fall away and are not being replaced - no sense of institutional authority.

3. Laughter and Working with what you have rather than against it

Laughter, especially public laughter, is seen as life-affirming and connecting and is increasingly missing from our public lives. There was a wistful quality to the discussion about laughter, as if it was something good that was now lost. This was in contrast to the energy associated with the idea of a mad, creative response to an awful situation, and a great attraction for the possibility of surviving well, of a defiant and positive grasping of opportunity in the face of disaster.

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.'

It was difficult to stay with the task and hypothesising was tentative and fragmented. There was a return to elaborate the themes. This felt safer and less challenging than the work to discern the underlying meaning.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: A strong preoccupation of the participants of this Listening Post was the loss of an Irish identity. We have lost some important parts of our identity. We have ambiguous feelings about this: increased diversity make us unrecognisable to ourselves and this is freeing and new as well as frightening. Human contact has been sanitised. There is a deprivation of human contact in many areas of life. In order to join with others, we have to find the 'lowest common denominator' - a bland sameness. In order not to exclude or offend anyone, we are required to avoid presenting difference or distinctiveness and so experience the loss of our true and different selves. This leads to increased anxiety which is enacted in an increasingly fractured and disconnected society.

Hypothesis: Disconnection from each other

It is difficult to integrate our complex feelings about the rapid changes in society. Our response is to idealise the past as good and the present and future as threatening and chaotic. This is a displaced fear and anxiety about who we are in this changed world and whether we will survive, and at what cost, in the future.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: In a rapidly changing world, there is little that is certain. We are unable to 'read' the world with the confidence that we had in the past. Our response to this is to strengthen personal boundaries, revealing little about our true selves and denying our curiosity and interest in each other, increasing the private and compromising the public self. The blandness that results leaves us with an appetite for unrestrained laughter and fun and for daring to be different.

Hypothesis: We are experiencing an unstructured group at a national and perhaps a global level. Unable to present our true selves, we choose people to be fundamental on our behalf. This both confirms our fears that we are at risk in the world and, paradoxically, reassures us that it is possible to be alive and passionate.

Convener: Mary Rafferty