

**"Britain and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a New Year's Listening Post
held on 10th 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, 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 Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Several themes were identified by the members,

Theme 1: Madness/ Reality/Multiple Realities

What is real? Different realities. Can we trust what is presented to us, can we trust our and other's views? What is hidden, what is below the surface out of site? The experience of one member's visit to a Mental Hospital which left her wondering what was 'real' triggered a number of associations around madness/reality. One member raised the question of multiple realities following work she had been doing in an organisation where there were multiple and conflicting views being expressed. There was a sense that much is hidden from view in society and organisations. The phrases used during the initial phase of the listening post of 'hidden behind the ramparts' and 'hidden below the surface' capture this perspective. How do we make sense of these multiple view points? We are presented by the media and governments with multiple views but what and who do we trust? This dilemma was captured in a member's experience of being approached by a pregnant woman in distress after Christmas, asking for help to visit her sick father. Although sceptical she responded with concern and gave her money only to find that others in her neighbourhood had had the same experience. This left her with a sense of being 'duped' and raised the question of can we even trust our own judgement? Might we be complicit in our own deception - through our own self deception? There is a willingness to believe and a difficulty in believing what we are told. The speed and complexity of change and concerns about globalisation, global warming, (glaciers disappearing within a generation but what can we do?) leaves us with a sense of dislocation; what can we take in, in a complex society where there is so much to take in? What do we want to take in of the relentless world views that are forced upon us by the media and governments? One member talked about not wanting to hear more of George Bush on the news because the implications of what he is saying are terrifying. Many issues remain below the surface and are never spoken of or discussed and therefore never fully understood for example - 'not a huge amount of concern in

organisations for employees' a reference to an organisation with a 50% turnover of staff. What is hidden and not being understood about society and the complexity we face as individuals?

Theme 2: Relatedness/ Retreat to Safe Places

There was throughout the session an underlying element of hope and optimism expressed as examples of relatedness and reference to how things were in the past. One member talked of their work on developing social cohesion in a London community. Others talked of the new beginning of retirement and the fun of being part of a large family gathering during the Christmas period. There was some speculation in the group about 'maybe we can make a difference' and this was echoed in the experience of a member, who was told by an organisation she had been working with, in response to a question about what she brought to the organisation, that she brought 'love and the ability to make people feel safe'.

This optimism also brought some references to lost values and lost ways of thinking: the lost value of learning for its own sake in a world preoccupied with measurement and value for money, the loss of wisdom and knowledge expressed by figures such as Stephen Tumin and General Ramsbottom in their work with prisons. Underlying these thoughts was what one member described as a Pollyanna desire to want to think 'things are ok'. There was also an appeal to the past in a reflection about the loss of the idea of trade and craft, where skills and workmanship link the craftsperson to their community.

Theme 3: Humanity / Beastliness

Running throughout the listening post were many references to humanity and an appeal to our humanness set against contrasting images and examples of beastliness. The humanity of connections describe above, the humanity of particular people - Ali Alawi, Al Gore & Robert Fisk. The humanity of being able to put our own concerns aside and know each others stories. This can be seen in the speed with which concern about Global warming has entered the public consciousness in a very short space of time and particularly since the publication of the Stern Report. There was a powerful often unspoken question about 'what it means to be human' in current society? But being human is difficult in a society that can sanction the development of stem cells that use human and animal DNA. What makes human being flourish and allows us to be human? One member speculated on what the core conditions are for developing a sense of self and the difficulty of this in a society where institutional and organisational attachment are continually under threat.

The Contrasting images were of beastliness - the polar bear and cub clinging to the ice flow, the use of the word feral to describe the self obsessed 'meness' behaviour of greed and consumer acquisitions. One member used the image of the 18th Century slave ship jettisoning bodies as a metaphor for organisations and society and suggested 'we all hate the way we live' and that is why we have become obsessed as a society with make over shows and ideas of wellness and wellbeing. There were examples of 'beastly behaviour' and brutality (for beastly read inhuman) - the meanness of a car driver who becomes a bastard behind the wheel, the hanging of Saddam Hussain, the guiding of missiles by remote control, a vice chancellor of a university who describes the university as too comfortable for students and staff, the aggression directed at 'foreigners' and those who are different.

Theme 4: Polarisation - Conciliation/ Centralisation - Disintegration

This theme captured the social, political and cultural tension between opposing ideas and the subsequent splitting that is evident in society in social identities. The polarisation of communities around different perspectives and world view was a focus for comment - Christian v Muslim, multiculturalism v integration. One member recounted their experience of being treated as a foreigner and their treatment as 'other'. This also related to the Iraq war and the imposition of democracy - democracy at gunpoint. Comments were made about Government that has centralised power and tries to legislate for and control behaviour and this evidences the increasing tension between the centralising tendency (attempts to control, manage and proscribe the way things should be done) and the loss of structures in the family, institutions and organisations that no longer provide containment leaving a sense of disintegration and not belonging.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

Contemporary capitalism has created an illusionary state of perfection in an attempt to sell us more and better products and services. Individuals, social institutions and organisations are in pursuit of this ideal. The pursuit of growth, the new and self improvement has pervaded all aspects of our lives as is evidenced in the media, through make over shows, self help books and through the obsession with celebrity and desire for celebrity status. This search however leaves us as a society out of touch with our humanity and relatedness to others. Unconsciously we have come to 'hate the way we live' in pursuit of this illusion caught as we are as individuals and organisations in the continuous pursuit of objectives and actions, leaving no time for 'being'.

The narcissistic, 'me-ness' that is evident in society is an avoidance of the difficulty and challenges of the human condition and the vulnerabilities of life - particularly death. Being out of touch with our humanity we are faced with our own destructiveness and inhuman capabilities and acts of terror and violence against others. Our capacity to be human is challenged by the increasing use of science to create 'objects' that may be part human and part animal. We are at war with our own human nature and increasingly feel a sense of displacement from ourselves.

Hypothesis:

Because we are preoccupied with growth and development in an attempt to achieve an illusory perfection we have lost touch as a society with the vulnerability of our humanity

and as a result defend and distract ourselves through busyness and consumer acquisitions against the anxiety and turmoil of existence.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

Unable to tolerate our own capacity as individuals and as a society for aggression and destruction we project it out into others - individuals, groups, and nations creating a split between ourselves as 'rational and reasonable' and others as 'monsters' who frighten us by holding up a metaphorical mirror to our projections. Difference becomes a source of fear as the other is seen as a threat - the other becomes the terrorists, the holders of Weapons of Mass Destruction, the suicide bomber in the Burka, the Eastern European stealing our jobs, the person who may get the resources or rewards in this me-ness culture. Even though 'we hate our way of life' the other is seen as a threat who is attempting to steal or undermine our way of life through the theft of our enjoyment and our way of life and this cannot be tolerated. We justify and rationalise our response, as in the invasion of Iraq, the imposition of ASBOs, government attempts to legislate and impose behaviour and 'respect' on society as an attempt to defend and impose 'our' values. This completes the circle of projections confirming that these 'others' are indeed the threat that we believe them to be.

Hypothesis:

Because we cannot face the consequences of our own destructiveness and aggression we create 'monsters' to act as the focus of our projections and as a result demonise and marginalise those who are different

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis:

The loss of traditional ways of life and communities and now the very visible breakdown of the natural world through pollution and global warming threaten our stability and security. As a society we are being faced with the environmental consequences of our lifestyles and in order to defend against the anxiety associated with the prospect of planetary 'annihilation' we continue to act as though we are in control of those forces that are out of our control. The speed with which this awareness of planetary destruction has entered the public consciousness over the past year has brought the anxiety to the fore - in the media and in social interactions. Pictures of disappearing glaciers, struggling wildlife and Al Gore film present us with an impending disaster that may be too late to avert. Yet despite this there is a belief that we are still in control - that science can solve the problem, that it is not a problem really, that economically we can still continue to grow and expand and maintain our lifestyles and levels of consumption.

Hypothesis:

Because the breakdown of social groups and communities is increasingly apparent and the destruction of the planet has become very visible we try to create an illusion of control in order to defend against the anxiety that it may be too late to change the way we live.

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