

**"Ireland and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 7th 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 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

Theme 1: Money

The convenor opened by asking members 'what's on your mind?' The first member to speak said that it was the second time that day she had been asked the question. The first enquiry was from a politician at her front door. She reported that she couldn't answer the politician, as "I can't talk to politicians." Members felt that that was how most citizens feel now. There was comment about the remoteness and grandiosity of Irish politicians and public service. The size and cost of our public spending has recently been disproportionately large (compared, for instance, to the UK). Members observed that we in Ireland want the same infrastructure in every county, no matter how small.

Politicians are taking the high moral ground in relation to banking and bankers. We as citizens have not been angry and are not angry enough about the abuses in financial and banking settings and about revelations of profligate personal spending by public and semi-state officials. Members reported resolving not to listen to the news anymore, because it reinforces a sense of impotence. A member questioned how we can get enough confidence to listen to each other now. There was an exchange about preparing for unemployment in the same way that you would prepare for a nuclear attack.

The theme emerged of what money used to represent, what it has come to represent, what we use it for and against. Having it and not having it, it's role and relationship to good times and bad times. The dominance of money is signalling worth, status, wellbeing and happiness. We should recognise the 'potentiating' power of money and not denigrate that alongside our rejection of excess. What can we use now instead of money to give us what money used to give us?

Theme 2: Transformation/ Hope and Hopelessness

There was some hope that the collapse of banking and organisation of employment would create an opportunity to rethink those systems. Members expressed the wish to contribute to thinking and recreating this and reflected some sense of social cohesion in this crisis.

There was reflection that the attraction to money and wealth had created a kind of madness and that even in the middle of it, there was a sense of unreality that this could not continue.

This week, a priest is walking from Cork to Dublin in a sign of atonement for his past silence on clerical sex abuse. There was some admiration for this, but members also recognised our cynicism leads us to think 'god knows what we'll discover about him.' Is it possible to believe in goodness or the absence of self-interest any more? Relating this to the broader economic and social crisis, members commented that they felt ashamed and asked 'am I complicit?' 'Was I silenced?'

Underlying much of the earlier conversation was a concern about transformation and transforming experiences. How a crisis can be either/both threat and opportunity. How the current difficulties, personally and societally, can be framed as hopeless and catastrophic or as a chance to revisit and rethink fundamentals.

Members expressed doubt that the present difficulties would allow better practices to develop in organisations. One member asserted that she did not experience people as any more cooperative, that there are abuses of power and use of hierarchy that people don't know how to collaborate. In summary, wealth proliferates and persists and so does poverty.

Theme 3: Sameness and Difference

A member drew attention to a broadcast celebrating the 80th birthday of the playwright Brian Friel, including some of Joyce's stories from Dubliners. The themes of hiding, covering up that are present in 'the Dead', written in 1904, are current today.

Members wondered if, perhaps especially in Ireland, there is a place for story and myth and if we can use these to help ourselves understand and resolve and to strengthen our identity. Our vision was that our particularities would be amplified in Europe, but instead we've become citizens of the world and more like the US. One member referred to a book by Chris Patton in which he asks "what is 'we' nowadays?"

One of the things we do when confronted with change is to raid our experience to find comparisons and parallels that reassure us that we know how to cope. So many comparisons with the 80s recession now. But we are better educated and we now know more from the past. Is there a way of harnessing the anger and putting it into an energy that means we don't go back to the bad old days. We can recognise the excesses of recent years, but we should be sure not to go back to deprivation.

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.

Analysis and Hypothesis

Anxiety about the Future

Analysis: Members identified the range of ways in which anxiety about the future was expressed during the evening. In the face of confusing, disturbing and unprecedented developments, we formulate meaning and multiple meanings to reassure ourselves. The preoccupation with commentary and the appetite for endless financial analysis and opinion is a seeking for meaning, explanation and reassurance. Even our anxieties are confused: we experience shock that our certainties (money, security, property, shares, endless economic growth) were wrong, but at the same time feel satisfied that we were right all along – our own intuitions were right. We are now coming out of the madness, like when a fever dies down, this feels better. I was much more uneasy two years ago because I couldn't join in. The dog that didn't bark. And what's going on in Gaza tonight – the focus on our much smaller concerns takes my mind off my impotence. So much pressure on Obama and a concern that one analysis is that war is good for the economy. This anxiety about the future is not unrelated to age. I am aware that I am coming to the end and am now trying to make sense and ask 'what was it all for?' Trying to make sense of the macro because of discomfort in the micro. Anxiety that society is so fragile. On the other hand, the conflict resolution in northern Ireland and the prosperity on the whole island should remind us that there is hope. The answer to current problems is not to go back to the way things were – we have to find different, better ways. This in the face of the fact that we have more war than ever before and that the more we seem to learn and know the less we seem able or ready to apply it. The Listening Post closed with a comment about human evolution – the evolution of human society, not just human individuals.

Hypothesis: Manifested in a whole variety of ways, we are experiencing change that feels overwhelming and certainly it is hard to imagine reversing these changes. This is like adolescence – simultaneously exciting and frightening. We recognise that the crescendo of consumption has collapsed and we hope that the space that was filled with money and consumption can be occupied with meaning that has more substance. We recognise the opportunities that this presents, but are concerned that our past experiences and our human impulses do not equip us to make something better. We have a chance to do this if we can learn to listen, to pay attention and have enough courage to tolerate the uncertainty. We have both fear and optimism for the future and a concern not to return to a more unequal, more deprived past. We feel overwhelmed, impotent and hopeless and at the same time resigned, resolved and confident that a way forward will be found, even if this is difficult to picture now.

Convener: Mary Rafferty