

"Canada and the World
at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post
held in January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post we were invited to identify, contribute, and explore our experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context. The discussion was lively and, the main focus was on aging, economic disparities, the decay of traditional film industry, and the changing technologies that affect the arts. A variety of similar areas were discussed and topics raised.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represents a clustering of at least some of these themes.

1. ***The Consequences of Income Disparity:*** The discussion began with an expressed concern about the income disparity inside individual countries. It was pointed out that those countries with the greatest income disparity between the best off and the worst off also had many other indicators of what might be called 'living well' that were worse. In such countries there was a lower regard for government, a higher crime rate, poorer health status and many other marks of weakening civil society than those of countries with a smaller difference between the highest and lowest income levels. The obverse was also true: where income disparity was lowest, everyone had a higher regard for civil government, there was a lower crime rate and the health status of everyone from the best off to the worst off was better. It was noted that in the last decade or two the income disparities had actually increased in countries like the USA, Canada and the UK. Policy efforts meant to increase the overall wealth of these countries had in effect also increased inequality of income: the best paid were even better paid and the worst off had benefitted the least and some were indeed worse off.

This topic seemed linked to the sense that even though everyone agreed that economic inequalities were increasing no one seemed able to do anything to reverse this trend. Canada which is a moderate country made up of moderate people who suffer from cold winters has a Conservative government that is bent on tax reductions which as everyone knows tends to increase income disparity. Canadians however appear to be too moderate to raise much of a fuss about the shenanigans of this minority government that allows them to govern as if they had a majority.

2. ***A Changing Sense of Effectiveness:*** A number of different sometimes unrelated areas amplified the feeling of some especially older members that they were

becoming less effective in the world. This was not unanimous. Others, mostly younger asserted their continued and even increased sense that what they did made a difference.

Waves rolling out in a lowering tide was offered as the metaphor for a continuing reduction of capability through aging. As the tide goes out and we get older the undertow increases and more and more of our capacities drift away and finally we gradually slip out to sea. This issue of decreased capacity was taken up in a variety of ways. Some participants spoke of the deterioration of the film industry – their particular field of endeavour. There was quite a lot of discussion about why this was happening. But the particular circumstance was that traditional approaches to producing films were less and less relevant and people felt that the production of new films was slowing down. Others found that they were feeling less secure about matters of artistic taste as the range of options and interpretations increased. And finally there was the sense that there was little we could do to stop the bad behaviour of a government that most of us believe has little to do with what our country is all about.

Others, especially the younger people among us felt that the deterioration of existing industries like recorded music and traditional film are an opportunity for new ideas and new blood. The Internet provides a showcase for all kinds of fresh ideas through You Tube and numerous arts related sites. Young artists find it easy to form international social networks of people with similar interests. In our discussion this group launched an implicit attack on the notion of a hierarchy of arts. There is talent and even genius to be found through the many different genres of music from hip hop to opera. Some of the most expressive and innovative works are graphic novels rather than 'high' literature. Artistic production is on the rise, but the media are changing – lots of good stuff on the Internet. They also felt that there was quite a bit of response to the silliness of the Canadian government in the parts of the Internet that they are familiar with. Their own networks are staunchly egalitarian.

Tides fall and rise.

3. ***Technology and the Internet as a Force:*** The Internet and the rapid introduction of new technologies for the production and distribution of arts and information formed a large part of the discussion. Technology has transformed art from the creation of objects and performances to the provision of a service. Art was described as a service industry that provides everything from entertainment to illumination. It is increasingly personal and linked to these new means of communication. Everyone can join a series of unique electronic communities devoted to the particular art forms that interest them and to their other particular interests. They can engage or disengage at will. They can become powerful political and artistic forces very quickly. It was pointed out that those forces can dissipate at the same rapid rate.
4. ***The Canadian Comedy Continues:*** This theme requires some explanation. In Canada the Conservative government was once more under threat before Christmas as a result of a report that Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan might be complicit in handing over prisoners of war to Afghan authorities who then tortured them. The Opposition was pursuing the issue and the Government defence was weakening daily. Steven Harper, the leader of the Conservative

Government, asked the Queen's representative, the Governor General, to 'prorogue' parliament until March – saying that it should begin a new sitting only after the Vancouver Winter Olympics ended. This allowed him to avoid further discussion of the Afghan issue. It also meant that the country would be governed without parliament for three months and that all committees would cease to sit and all bills that were pending would have to be re-introduced. The Conservatives would retain all powers of the Prime Minister and a sitting government. This was the second time in two years that this obscure method was used to close parliament and the country is irate. The polls show that popularity of the government has eroded considerably. The mixed feeling in the room about our effectiveness extended to the discussion about how opposition to Harper might be mustered. Some felt that there was no effective opposition to his high-handedness, and that Canadians were sitting idly by as Harper eroded the democratic parliamentary process. Others saw a growing protest appearing in Internet blogs and messages and felt that this was the beginning of a growing protest.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3 of the Listening Post we were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics that may be predominant. It is assumed in this part of our discussion that our individual and collective ideas and ways of thinking determine how we perceive the world. We tried to develop hypotheses as to why these concerns might be occurring now and although there were few clear, easily identifiable hypotheses, there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This discussion has been distilled into the following interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: There were many explanations about the concerns expressed in the room. The talk was especially lively and somewhat disorderly. The discussions about the effects of aging and about our diminishing effectiveness may have been linked to a deeper sense of inability to reduce the existing and increasing socio-economic inequalities in society.

Hypothesis: The dichotomy between old and young was an especially loaded underlying issue. The fear of becoming impotent victims of external forces lends itself easily to the fear of old age, increased dependency on others and the inevitable increasing inequality between the very old and the young.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The issue of a diminished and diminishing hierarchy in the arts was a counter to the discussion of increasing economic inequality. The expectation that the technology of the Internet and access to it was a very profound leveller was felt by many in the room.

Hypothesis: It may be that our unconscious hope was that through technology there might be a rapid and effective response to the deepening economic inequalities that were presented at the beginning of the discussion. Perhaps there was an even deeper hope that technology would find a way to ease the sense of decline of the elderly. But also there was a sense that it was time for a new generation to take a stab at making things better.

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