

**"The UK and the World
at Spring 2005"**
Report of a Listening Post
held in Belfast
on Wednesday 1st June



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 these 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 'social' 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. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

(a) Learning by young people.

It was felt that learning was taken more seriously these days. Teachers and children were working much harder than in previous generations.

This led to better results. But it also led to a greater degree of failure and to greater pressures on young people. There was also an issue about young people defining themselves and having the opportunity to develop in different ways. However, the stronger pressure is to conform which is linked to a fear of difference. At the same time, there is a fear by the current generation that they are letting a lot of people down and not providing the necessary support and nourishment to the younger generation.

(b) Organised religion.

It was felt that organised religion imposed an unreasonable pressure on members of society to conform. The entire role of religion was questioned. And this included world religions such as Islam. It was acknowledged that there had been a fear of religion. Both bureaucracy and organised religion helped to create an unreasonable pressure in society. At the same time, there was considerable concern about societal values and concepts. It seemed that the morals, rules and structures of society and community were not being followed or modelled by the organised religions.

(c) Failing institutions, new champions, media influence.

It was asked who the current societal champions and challengers were. Where was the sense of community; and what had happened to the quality of social. It was not just organised religion that was failing but many other institutions and leaders were also

failing. These included the Government and local organisations. There was a concern that in the absence of true formal leadership the Media and celebrities had become an influence that was not always an influence for good and was seen as too powerful.

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. There was a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience and this analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

Anxiety created by rate and complexity of change - threats to survival.

Analysis:

At one level the membership were concerned with issues regarding the education of young people. However, from the analysis in Part 3 it was realised that these were expressions of deeper underlying concerns. It was appreciated that society had changed dramatically and that it had now become a fast, technological society where access to information is much wider. But at the same time our space is now occupied by a world wide community, a faster bigger world, so fast so strong, that we can't keep up with it. So much so that we now have a fear of not surviving; a fear of not knowing; or of being ignorant; and of not knowing what people expect you to do. This generation was brought up on the understanding that a good education was the only way to get out of poverty. At the same time members of society have a thirst to know, and a wish to take on new things. The wish is to embrace learning but that would put expectations on the self. As one member stated, I don't want to learn because I might not be able to cope - so I stay the same. It was also felt to be a problem because members of society did not get feedback on what they had learnt. For some it was felt that education was passing them by - that was frightening. The rate of change was also seen as frightening and members had a fear of not knowing. Email was cited as an example where members had got left behind. But at the same time it was appreciated that we have to learn to use new technology such as email if we are to keep up. There was a concern for the next generation and that current demands on children could lead to a generation of young people growing up as perceived failures. It was felt that the current generation had taken a step forward but what was the expectancy for the next generation? One member cited the French school system as a model that from the outset of school experience creates a space for kids to be confident enough to learn. The fear being that our current demands on young people were unreal. For example one member quoting Francis of Assisi, said that 'Man can have only as much knowledge as they can put to useful purpose'; another referred to the film Educating Rita, which provided an example of someone having the courage to be different.

Hypothesis:

Because of the rate and complexity of change which is largely driven by globalisation and technology members of society experience anxiety that they will not be able to cope, will become failures, and will not survive. One way they deal with this is to

project hope and fears into the younger generation. Thus the young generation is seen as both saviours of and for society but they are also seen as a cause for concern because of an awareness that they have been let down and are being used by this generation.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2.

From moral dependency to autonomy - but where next?

Analysis:

Members of society experience the intrusive nature of organised religion as a fear of people telling them what to do, or of how to be. They fear people thinking for them. There is a fear of religion having control over members of society. It was felt that organised religion seriously impacted on individual and collective freedom. However, things have changed and there was now an appreciation that organised religion was not beyond criticism and was no longer to be accepted without question. Members of society now realize that as well as being a force for good there were also downsides. For example, that religion encourages division and tribalism; and that fundamentalism and puritanical approaches were not acceptable. God's law and man's law need to be the same and in regard to issues such as sexual abuse the church must not be seen or experienced as being above societal law. Overall, there was a clear feeling of being freed up from dependence on organised religion to a more autonomous position. Yet there were still doubts and members asked how many follow and how many challenge? But it was acknowledged that members of society can now challenge and debate. As one member said, 'There is now an opportunity where we can challenge without people cutting our heads off.' Another said, "Catholics now challenge and don't believe they'd die if they did not attend mass." In addition, the debate extended to the role of organised religion and its impact throughout the world. This was identified at a local level by a member who stated, "We employ a Muslim, a nice guy from Baghdad. Others say 'watch him'. It would seem there is a fear of not knowing, of difference." Faced with the knowledge and freedom to take their own authority members of society are moving away from their dependency on the church; but what's the result, a hole is left and this creates anxiety. This leads to a sense of killing off the church and a resulting fear of not being nourished. Members realise that it may be OK for individuals to make moral judgements about themselves, but what's good for society? How do we deal with big issues such as cloning?

Hypothesis:

Because of changes in society which include the perceived failure of organised religion to provide a sound moral guidance and nourishment, members of society have moved from being highly dependent on organised religion and have begun to take their own authority for social morality and nourishment. This results in feelings of guilt for 'killing off' the church and a subsequent fear and guilt that society left to its own devices is unable to provide the necessary moral guidance. An outcome is a doubt at the collective societal level as to what is best for society and a fear that 'community' will fragment and become disorderly.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3.

Failing Leaders and Institutions - who is filling the void?

Analysis:

Members felt that current social, political and religious leaders and the various

institutions that they represented were failing to provide the necessary social leadership. Examples of media figures such as Jamie Oliver were seen to be having considerable influence and were almost directing policy on important issues. Kylie Minogue was seen as having done more to bring about awareness of breast cancer than any government or other 'official' initiatives. In the past and currently, there are leaders we look up to. These included those such as Gandhi and Mandela; and in Northern Ireland, Gordon Wilson. But we seem to be lacking what was referred to as a 'leadership for good'. Mention of Tony Blair was to provide an example of what was not appropriate and of what was not required. A further example of failure was that of the church which used to provide moral leadership; however it was felt that this role was now also filled by celebrities. The likes of Bono and Bob Geldof were examples. But it was realised that this was an unreal situation and that these were really only mythical figures that we create and like to follow. It was likened to ancient times when we used to follow the sun and to humorous representation such as the Life of Brian film which urged people to 'take off your sandals.' This realisation that these were not true leaders who were dealing with the real issues, led in turn, to a discomfort that society still had to deal with major issues at some stage.

Hypothesis:

Because of the societal changes detailed in hypotheses 1 & 2 above, social, political and religious leadership is seen to be failing as are the institutions that those leaders represent. In their absence, alternative leaders such as media figures and celebrities are mobilised to provide societal leadership. Members of society treat these leaders as some sort of godlike individuals who are perceived as omnipotent and omniscient: all knowing and all doing leaders who have the capability of achieving anything and everything. Members of society have the belief that if they only wait long enough these leaders will produce the sought for magic cure. But there is also awareness that this involves avoidance and escapism and that these leaders will eventually be experienced as not meeting societal expectations of achieving this totally impossible task. Eventually, society will have to overcome this discomfort and deal with the major issues that are being avoided.

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