

**"Britain and the World
at Spring 2005"
Report of a Listening Post
held in Birmingham
on 20th July**



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 four interrelated themes:

Theme 1: Them and Us: Haves and have nots

This theme contained various versions of us and them and haves and have nots. Who are 'us' and who are 'them'?

One way of relating us and them was to consider the haves and have nots. Reference was made to the IRA bombings and it was posited that the same happened to the Irish as is now happening to Asians. It was the experience that the splits were almost exclusively concerning Asians. The Asian community had been split off and blamed by the Government and told they must resolve the problem. Mention was made of Tony Blair's statement that the bombers were 'out to destroy our way of life'. This was regarded as 'jingoistic bollocks' and there was anger about it because it feeds into people's exclusive needs, it is therefore considered scary. Linking the bombings to the events on 9/11 it was asked 'why would anyone do this?' How could anyone do this? It was also felt that there had been little attempt to understand how those responsible might have done such a thing when they were all from a sort of pool that we're all in. It was felt that there had been no attempt to identify some of those responsible, and that did not include people in mosques in north London. There was a sense of affinity with us and them; the victims of the Madrid bombings. It was felt that while this event had been referred to when London was bombed, there had been precious little in the press before. Members wondered how they reacted and what we can learn from it. It was felt that there was a healthy side to splitting as it allowed the existence of difference. Above all it was felt that the real issue regarding us and them was the 'them' which is in all of us. Thus our real concern is with ourselves.

Theme 2: Hope and Despair

At one point the title was described as being 'DESPAIR' in capitals and 'hope' in lower case; making the point that despair was of a greater significance than hope. It was almost as if despair could not be regarded on its own and that the accompanying hope was a means of dealing with the despair. The London bombings were fresh in the members memory and it seemed that there was a struggle to find reasons that would promise hope. One member explained how on the train the day after the bombings they felt the need to smile at others especially those visually different. The member said, 'despair is round the corner but I don't want to go there'. Reference was made to a radio interview of David Barenboim who was able to see both sides of the Palestine Israel conflict. His notion that there was a need for both sides to work together or they will both be destroyed was seen as an unusually aware view of this deep seated problem. And his notion that it is not helpful to refer to fundamentalism because this results in closure of thinking was regarded as providing optimism. One member referred to her son who lives in Mexico. In that country there are clear demarcations between those who have and the have nots. Two weeks ago her son was robbed at gun point but out of this despair hope was present because a witness to the robbery gave him some money. A member spoke of a peace vigil where the slogan was: 'United in grief - united in peace'. Members also sought to mitigate despair by seeking examples of hope in reported experiences of care, respect, and helping out. Referring to the bombings one member said that these things do fade away. However. They were not despairing as they've been through this cycle and people can become together. Despair was seen as unfathomable and indigestible.

Theme 3: Hearing and Being Heard

A member spoke of attending a 'Peace Now' group which supports the peace movement in Israel and Palestine. A Speaker at that event was the aunt of a female suicide bomber. Although being Jewish the member felt she had to hear what she had to say. The story was that on the day before the woman committed suicide she had celebrated her MA and was full of life. The first news the aunt had about the Suicide bombing was when she heard details on television. Shortly after hundreds of people turned up at the family home. Knowing that the family home of suicide bombers will be torn down by Israelis these locals arrived and stripped everything from the house. This madness, was followed by the Israeli soldiers who then blew up the house. For the group of Jews listening to this it was only possible to listen to fragments. Some fragments would go along side each other, while others were out of their awareness. It would seem that we find it hard if not impossible to listen, emotion stops us from doing so. The bad object is split off and demonised it then becomes impossible to listen. It is even difficult to think when emotions are so strong - thoughts are indigestible.

Theme 4: Gluttony and Greed

Members were struck by the description of people in Niger and other African countries helping themselves to goods supplied to feed the starving. This was aptly described as 'theft under cover of aid'. Members questioned what was happening to aid to Africa. It was felt that there was something underhand and deceitful about the process. The picture of Niger and the locusts seemed to conjure up the image of them and us which had turned into the I taking from own people. Hilary Benn had spoken on TV of having paid out millions of pounds to Save the Children and other agencies. When told that there was no one on the ground the response was 'Well it takes time' Trade with Africa was seen as a corrupt process and that Bush was engaged in double talk. In stark contrast to Niger we were aware of the problem of obesity in this country. Programmes on TV, about losing weight, changing image, somehow seemed cosmetic. The motorway

at night was seen to be full of lorries which sounded like ancient Rome. The consumer traffic was moving by night to feed the greedy city by day. Obesity was seen as something indigestible as well. As was the case with Rome burning it was asked, 'are we all going to expire because of greed?'

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 appreciated that the preoccupations around the recent experiences of bombings in London were real and that this was a genuine societal concern. However, the members sought to go beyond this in an attempt to understand what was occurring at a psychological level in society. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

The 'Them' in 'Us': Denial of Hateful feelings

Analysis:

In an attempt to understand the meaning of us and them it was realised that we all have these same destructive processes in each of us from birth and that this was part of human nature. It was felt that it was a very difficult task to explore us and them. How could we possibly act as suicide bombers? How could we be so destructive? No one knew that the suicide bombers were among them. It was considered that it might equally have been the son or daughter of someone who was present. People asked 'What corrupts individuals? But then it was realised that this might not be a corruption. But the difficulty was that in removing the image of a 'corrupted one' we then had to view this suicide bomber in a way that he or she is not a demon but someone who is both good and bad. Thus we might now be able to see this person as someone who was also a much loved and beautiful son or daughter, brother or sister or even mother or father. Mostly we can't begin to even think in this way because of our tendency to see them as demons full of wickedness. One member was seen to be representing society when she realised that her actions in the group could be seen as attacking another member of the group. Awareness of this possibility was quite a shock that she might have done so. But as was posited this is what happens. Yet it was no less a problem to challenge ones own destructiveness and to challenge it. A further consideration of suicide and death of a young mother engaged in mountaineering who left orphaned children brought further understanding. One member said, 'at this point I became a good mother'. This enabled me to leave all bad out there and to keep the good inside me. As long as others plant bombs it's an opportunity for us to deny our hateful feelings.

Hypothesis:

Faced with an awareness of highly emotional murderous events and threats to their personal safety members of society split off all hateful feelings and locate them in the bombers and those suspected of being bombers. The result is that fixed, inflexible notions about individual bombers or groups identified as associated with bombers are developed which results in demonisation of these individuals and groups. The associated emotion, in turn, blocks the ability of members of society to think about these

individuals and groups or even to listen to views that are contrary to those they hold. Hatred and revenge then become the natural responses and understanding becomes a near impossibility.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2.

The 'Haves' and 'Have Nots': The Shadow Over My Neighbour

Analysis:

The analysis around this hypothesis was varied and fragmentary. Members struggled to come to terms with the basic conflicts surrounding the issue of preservation of 'our' way of life as opposed to the affect that this was having on other people's way of life. The apparent guilt made it difficult to present a coherent analysis. The extreme conflict was apparent in one member's decision as to whether a computer should be repaired or whether to take a cheaper option of replacing it with a new one. It was tempting to spend less money yet it was realised that replacement would have affects on those who mined the resources required to provide a new computer. Politically it was realised that in Chile the interference of America resulted in hundreds of deaths, yet it was also realised that Communism had also resulted in hundreds of deaths. How do we know what is ethical shopping? Globalisation can result in child labour, sweat shop conditions and asset stripping of resources. We are greedy; we are manipulated by our greed into failing to consider the needs of those in other places. We know that we are well off. Yet we wonder what would happen if our access to resources such as petrol were turned off. How would we feel if our standard of living dropped? Would it result in ill-health and disease? Will we continue to protect 'our way of life' or put another way - what we have? Are we prepared to kill to do so? It seems that there is a sense of self preservation that happens in individuals and globally. Our fear of the other and the threat to our identity have all been awakened by the bombings. Could it be that this further self-understanding also leads to an understanding of them - the suicide bombers? One member quoted Lauren Van Der Post 'He who withdraws his shadow from his neighbour is doing work of universal importance'. The shadow of the bomber is over us: is our shadow over them?

Hypothesis:

Our fear of the other and the threat to our identity have been awakened by the bombings. Members of society are struggling to come to terms with the basic conflicts surrounding the issue of preservation of 'our' way of life as opposed to the affect that this is having on other people's way of life. Having a common enemy in the Muslim bombers helps us to suppress our guilt and to assert our right to the preservation of our way of life. Yet in a strange way this understanding of self can also lead to an understanding of the bombers who may also be seen as asserting *their* right to the preservation of *their* way of life.