

**"Britain and the World  
the Spring of 2005"**  
Report of a Listening Post  
held in Bristol  
on Thursday 9th 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:

### **(1) An imposed dependence on technology.**

Members of the Listening Post expressed strong feelings of being terrorised and strangled by the controlling influence of technology.

Everything was much faster now and there was too much 'busyness' which, it was felt, led to trauma and stress, or even a fear of death and of being excluded. It was likened to the notion of being shipwrecked where you were left to your own devices and had to learn or die. The imposition of technology and the speed of change and information flow coupled with a lack of time results in feelings of strangulation through too much control. For example, technology was even being used to tag people at work to ensure they did not take unapproved breaks.

### **(2) A lack of time and opportunity for creativity.**

The overall feeling was that members of society were being denied autonomy and creativity by enforced dependence on technology. There was a lack of time and opportunity for creativity. It had become an issue of creativity versus theory, statistics, bureaucracy and rationality. The latter led to a sort of standardisation or cloning of culture, and a world where people have to fit or be excluded. But it was felt that there is much which can't be theorised and it is not possible to prove and confirm every aspect of life. Yet we were being denied the opportunity to be creative and with that the opportunity to love and be honest with each other. Members of society were experienced as being impoverished and killed off as individuals. As one member said 'I don't want to be put in a box'. Put another way, members of society do not want to be killed off and put in coffins.

### **(3) A search for miracles; magical thinking and spirituality.**

While science and technology may supply 'right answers' these right answers are not trusted. We are told people are going to die and then they recover without a theoretical or scientific explanation. Yet this alternative possible explanation is not available and a result is that members of society feel driven and don't have a voice, they simply act like a machine. People feel idiots because they cannot keep up with the machinery. Belief systems become forms of terrorism. And all the while there is a missing component in our lives regarding spirituality and community. Feelings of helplessness, exclusion and even survival lead us to question and search for meaning and reason. But we are overloaded and overworked and cannot escape the prison and helplessness of technology. Faced with this helpless and hopeless situation members of society seek for explanations through miracles. Being totally disillusioned and with all hope gone the search is for a miracle that will relieve us from this dire and painful existence or provide a magical cure.

### **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 two interrelated hypotheses:

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1.**

*Loss and a search for a Messiah*

#### **Analysis:**

There is a loss of collective belief. We are not being held or contained and have given up all hope of survival. It is as if we are under siege. There are more and more controls and more and more bureaucracy and it is difficult to see any cause for hope. There are no signs of a different political party or whatever that will provide a way of dealing with the current situation and find an answer. There is a collective defensive reaction in a loss of belief in our leaders and institutions. We've lost faith in the magic of our institutions. A result is that we deal with this by escapism in supporting the likes of Bob Geldof, or individually by engaging in Sudoku, where we can gain a feeling of achievement. One member told the story of a village in Italy where a group of four villagers were invited to write a play about an historical event in 1553 when the village was under siege. In the modern version the village was put in the context of Iraq and was again besieged. The significant factor was the closure of a home for the rehabilitation of mental patients a firm fixture in the village and one people were proud of. They first chucked out the most vulnerable, the mental patients. The play ends with the village handing over the keys to the besieging army. In the same way members of society felt that they were under siege from the bureaucracy, demands, stress and trauma which all characterise modern day life. It was felt that we were getting too much too quick and this was causing illness and death. As one member said it was like cancer cells which are ordinary cells but they don't know when to stop. In like manner one email is good but ninety emails is cancerous. Technology can keep people alive as was the case with Terry Shiavo. However, Government rules mean that doctors will not

treat old. It was a terrifying thought that you could go on and on, getting older and older so that you go on beyond being capable. Persecution by the processes that are meant to be helpful leaves us wondering where we go from here and how we can get out of this unholy mess. In many ways this should not be a surprise. For example, Max Weber wrote about the iron cage of bureaucracy and suggested that faced with such anxiety members of society would respond by: a search for the magical to reconnect; a retreat into the world of aesthetics and arts; a retreat into personal relationships. It would seem that the first of these retreats, the search for the magical, is a current dynamic and any attempts to deal with matters in a more creative fashion faces catastrophe. It is suggested that the success of books such as the De Vinci code are supportive of this notion. It is as if the Messiah is coming and a huge secret is about to be revealed. A secret that will provide society with the leadership required. There is a huge degree of disillusion about the hope we have vested in technological systems. And, because of what we've lost we are seeking for something new. We are looking for a social miracle.

***Hypothesis:***

Because of the speed and rate of change, technological advance is seen as having caused more problems than it has created solutions. Members of society now experience life as being under siege from the all intrusive and deadly controls and impositions and this results in feelings of helplessness and loss of hope of finding a way out. Desperation leads to regression and a search for the magical to provide some sort of Messiah who will provide a social miracle to rescue society from this siege.

**Analysis and Hypothesis 2.**

*A fragmented society: Guilt and ownership*

***Analysis:***

It was felt that as a society we were avoiding the truth. We were surrounded by technological rituals. Unlike social rituals that held communities and societies together there are now man made rituals not natural rituals. Computers are now our rituals and those rituals that we call work. We have a reaction against these rituals because there is no time for other rituals. We have a lot of goods but we no longer enjoy them, they are becoming not a benefit but a bother. There is simply 'too much information' and we are extremely busy carrying out all sorts of activities and taking on more and more roles. A result is that this reduces our attention to the collective. Away from our highly individualistic approach there is another sort of society: we have become blind to the loss of community. A member spoke of a book about women ageing and suggested that there should be a social ceremony marking the menopause. It would be insightful and provide a societal role such as that in more primitive societies who were proud of this moment of social transition. A point where it was now the woman's own time, there were no child caring functions, and she could pursue her own interests, she could become a wise old lady. However, the response of women in our society was to try to retain their youth by having face lifts, going on diets, buying new clothes, and doing everything possible to avoid becoming old. This was seen as another example where the social rituals have been replaced by technological rituals. A result is individual concern at the expense of community. But underlying this hedonistic search for individual survival and a quest for eternal youth there is a deep seated concern that we have abandoned our responsibility to our fellow citizens. One member cited the film 'Castaway' which starred Tom Hanks. There is a point in the film where the shipwrecked man hits rock bottom. At this point he gives up and allows himself to be swept along by the tide to be taken anywhere. Another member cited a book by A.A.Milne, 'Man on the

Island'. Again in this example, a shipwrecked man is washed ashore and considers what he might do first. Should he light a fire, search for water, or build a shelter. In the event he simply lies down and waits. It is felt that this is a metaphor for members of society who faced with the extreme difficulties posed by technological rituals adopt a very individualistic 'busy' approach and simply not concern themselves with society. But this raises serious issues for each of us such as who will care for me? We become envious of others, and fear for our survival. We know that some of these matters can only be resolved if we have a strong sense of society. In seeking for a sense of community could it be we are feeling guilty because we must all accept an individual and collective blame for the state of society? This is a very painful truth but so are the current experiences of members of society.

***Hypothesis:***

Because of technological advances society has become more individually focused. The search for individual survival and a quest for eternal youth and a denial of death has caused members of society to ignore the collective and abandon their responsibility to fellow citizens. But in moments of reflection members of society realize that they are reliant on others for their very survival. Without society and social action we are at the mercy of the technology. However, such awareness also makes them aware of their feelings of guilt for each of their failings that have contributed to an uncaring and, at times, dangerous society.

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