

**"Britain and the World
the Spring of 2005"**
Report of a Listening Post
held in Oxford
on 24th 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. The members engaged well with the task with some illuminating and intense discussion.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In part 2 the aim was to collectively identify major themes emerging from part 1. Of the 6 themes identified, these have been distilled into 3 major themes.

a. The alienation of identity - a reduction in the capacity to act (have agency)

Several members talked of a sense of feeling increasingly impotent about themselves as 'citizens' being able to act/ have agency to influence change. It is as though we watch change happening around us from a goldfish bowl. Examples given were peoples unwillingness to commit to anything, a lethargy in the older generation which was acted out: e.g. separate mealtimes for children and parents at home, how older people are marginalised, and their experience not valued. Politicians were cited as bringing about change to our constitution e.g. in the House of Lords, in the E.U on which there was 'no genuine' discussion, it 'just happened'. Comments were made about the lack of integrative thinking over Iraq/Afghanistan, why did not western leaders talk with the Arab nations before invasion?. The African Union cannot outrightly condemn Mugabe. Those who had been brought up in the post war society felt their identity and connection to society was clearer. The members were concerned that no-one was encouraged to question, there was only compliance. This compliance created more anxiety about identity and agency e.g. If you don't organise a pension the consequence will be that you will be poverty stricken.

b. Suspicion, fear and 'fractures' projected onto youth

The discussion opened with a view of how materialistic young people now are. Everything is available, with no recourse to saving up, going without etc. The trial of Michael Jackson was discussed, a confusing iconic figure who is both immature child and yet an adult, involved in allegations of child abuse, i.e. abusing the trust of children.

The members discussed 'where young people fit' in society. The current climate is bleak. Youth are demonised e.g. the 'Bluewater' shopping centre ban on 'hoodies'. These issues are magnified politically and by the media, creating further fear and alienation for young and old. There was concern from members of our fundamental hypocrisy about including children, members talked of experiences of feeling 'not wanted with children' when in public places. We have created a myth of the family. Single mothers are criticised for abandoning children to work, or are regarded as 'spongers' if on benefits. Some members observed how children in families now need to 'fit a role', rather than feeling unconditionally loved. Concern that the 'lifestyle child' had arrived.

c. Revolution or Evolution

The members talked about whether the current 'social revolution', the speed of life and constant technological change would bring about an evolution in consciousness. News of 'couch potatoes' developing larger brains. Does cognitive change bring about avoidance or hope?. Will the speed by which we can obtain information, and our reduced inter-dependence bring about a modification or evolution in consciousness? World war 1 and 2 were mentioned, they brought about social changes e.g. work and increased power for women, but the post war period has left us with a feeling of no foundation to commit to. Our idealisation of the past provides comfort, we can live in history, rather than face the here and now. With traditional institutions being changed or removed in this 'revolution', we are left without a sense of belonging, or the change belonging to us. In this sense we have a new more cynical consciousness. Can we integrate and use the speed of societal change, without damning it, in order to understand where we are, where we might be going? The global network breaks down barriers leaving us feeling part of a network revolution, but unsure of strong boundaries and foundations.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information from parts 1 and 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying and predominant conscious and unconscious dynamics. In this part members are working with their 'psycho' or internal world. Their collective experiences and ideas and ways of thinking determine their perception of these external realities and shape their actions towards them. The two distilled hypotheses that emerged were linked by society being in the middle of a social revolution, a 'turbulent field' which impacted on relationships, identity and how members felt connected or not, to a concept of a containing society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

Confusion about our relationship to authority

Analysis:

Issues and feelings about authority were prevalent. Members talked of their own childhood's when there was felt to be a clearer definition of authority, this 'omnipresent' authority helped people define themselves. It was felt to be a safe and containing paternal authority. WW2 was a recurring theme, and it felt to be a historical juncture, of changing attitudes to authority. World leaders at the time whether Hitler or Churchill were defined by power and authority. It was felt that Thatcher created a war over the Falklands in order to define a needed concept of authority for 'Great' Britain, the 'great' had been in decline. It was felt now that the government exerts authority through creating benevolent dependency (compliant citizens), or by creating a climate of fear (post 9/11). But the government is shown little respect, apparent by the apathy of voters. Only those who 'have and do' have respect and authority. Authority is no longer

seen as being gained in a mutual relationship, Robert Owen's 'obligation to reciprocity' is not enacted e.g. suspicion of the police, teachers and company directors. Power and authority requires a relationship, members felt that unless we build relationships with such agencies there will be no respect for their authority. The promotion of a culture of celebrity, eg 'big brother' has become attractive because it is all form, no substance - no relationships.

Hypothesis:

We are living in a time when the old order 'post war' authority which was represented by positive projections/relationships onto societal institutions, eg teaching, doctors, police, industry, no longer represents a containing authority for people. Because of this failure of relationship, (failed dependency) suspicion has grown that adds to our belief or feeling of being more distant and therefore more suspicious, this in turn fragments further a sense of trust in society. As a result people withdraw from relating leaving the 'authority vacuum' filled with anxiety. Others attempts to create authority through violence e.g. terrorism, finds a natural stage in this vacuum, further alienating people from a sense of a containing and caring society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2.

Projection/displacement of a lack of identity onto others

Analysis:

Several participants talked of their concern for our current experience. One member commented 'the vastness of being human is intolerable and immense'. Current conditions put us in touch with the unpredictable consequences of this 'vastness'. Instead of getting to know or celebrating this quality - instead of learning how to use it, we shut down. Rather than allowing knowledge of each other we create silo's. The role of fathers was a regular theme, members felt that the role of the father was disregarded or subsumed into one of 'macho' protector. Women in the group felt there had been more opportunities for emancipation, they were in a stronger position because of the more recent feminist 'revolution'. Members talked of a pervasive lack of contentment. With institutional structures changing so rapidly there is little aspiration for a better society, more apathy. How can this change be celebrated rather than feared? Members gave examples of friends e.g. a blind barrister who took her fight over equal rights into every situation possible e.g. disabled access in supermarket chains. Members questioned this fight. There is a Kafkaesque struggle in the public domain for natural rights - why? The rights of the individual are 'ridden roughshod' by public institutions.

Hypothesis:

Our changing relationship to institutions and our confusion about authority mean that individuals feel less part of society. Because of this they fall back on individuality or their own primary identity group, this leaves us without a relationship to 'a public arena'. Because of this other groupings become targets for displaced and projected feelings of 'being different', and therefore a threat to idealised future group unity. The institutions e.g. large dept. stores are subliminally conscious of this, they both need these diverse groups (the fragmented society) and yet like the public, are afraid of the impact of further division. They unconsciously take the fight to those groups seen as threatening e.g blind people. The result of this displacement is a cycle/feeling of the public and institutions fearing further fragmentation and alienation.

Convener: John Diamond