

"Britain and the World
Spring 2006"
Report of a Spring Listening Post
held in April
in London



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 experiences in their various social roles (work, unemployment, retirement, religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary, leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities). This part was largely concerned with people's everyday life experiences, as it related to the 'socio' or 'external lives' of the participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this part, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes which had emerged from Part 1. A number of interrelated themes could be seen as follows:

Theme 1: 'A disorientating world'

The strongest and most unifying theme of how members' were experiencing the world was as a disorientating place, where familiar and known political and religious structures, interpersonal relationships and roles seemed simultaneously unfamiliar and different. This was expressed by one member as being 'lost with familiar people', and by another member as a physical sense of disorientation in 'getting lost' on the way to the event. There was uncertainty and some confusion about where experiences could be located and understood in this changed landscape which appeared simultaneously familiar and different. Things seemed 'out of control' as evidenced by the number of recent racist murders publicised by the media, and the fragmentation of political leadership which had become discredited and was now no longer able to provide effective containment, or as one member expressed it, 'the leadership role is lost', and people were not taking others into account in their thoughts or actions.

Theme 2: 'A shrinking sense of time and creativity'

There was a sense that people in society were relating to time in a present-orientated way and were engaged in practices which left little space for creativity and creative thinking. Time appeared to 'shrink' and there was a struggle to find and create the conditions which would nurture creativity. A false sense of security was achieved through filling up time with day-to-day anxieties which demanded our attention but at the same time left us feeling bereft of time, with no time to talk and communicate with others in ways which might create new ways of seeing and understanding problems. It was as if people were busy working at a task as a way of avoiding a task, but had lost sight of the task some time ago. People's relationship to time was in flux, and with this shift in

perspective and meaning there was a loss e.g. the illusion of infinity and the death of the belief in eternal life as part of a religious belief system.

Theme 3: 'Disillusionment or hope in politics?'

Members were preoccupied with the results of recent elections in Europe and elsewhere in the world where a very close vote between parties had been delivered, which offered no clear majority or mandate to a single party to govern. Could this mean that voters were ensuring that parties had to work harder at representing people and collaborating with politicians in other parties if they were to govern? There was uncertainty about the likely outcome of the local council elections in the UK in the following week, and how people would express the disillusion and cynicism they felt for their political leaders. There was a feeling that people no longer knew how they could be represented, and that politicians had lost people's trust. There was a desire for change, and maybe this was part of a wider phenomenon if viewed against the growing number of women around the world who were being elected to leadership positions. This was a familiar political landscape, but could something different be happening that offered the possibility of hope and communities coming together to produce new outcomes?

Theme 4: 'Local politics in a globalised world'

Globalisation reinforced the perception that things were 'out of control'. Super political structures such as the G8 Group exercised great power and were 'outside' individual governments. The interests of these groups were self-serving and people's protests were ignored. The dark shadow of this state of affairs was terrorism, which had also become amorphous and was without bounded organisational life, with the resultant feeling that these groups were also 'out of control'. It was already too late to arrest much of the predicted effects of global warming, and political leaders were failing in the thinking they brought to the problem. It was paradoxical that on the 20th anniversary of Chernobyl, nuclear power might be part of a strategy for limiting the effects of global warming, representing the dual possibilities of destruction and creation in the solutions, and order out of chaos.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post, members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2 with a view to collectively identifying the underlying conscious and unconscious dynamics that might be predominant at the time, and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, members were working more at identifying what was happening at the level of the 'internal' world. The collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. The themes that emerged were clear and interrelated, and a lively and passionate discussion took place in which members tried to make sense of the Listening Post experience.

Analysis: 'A disorientating world'

There was a feeling that the familiar containing structures in society were in a state of disintegration. People had lost their faith in political parties and leaders and no longer knew how their interests could be represented. The global 'market place' and the greed it created occupied a central place in people's lives, and thrived in the hands of governments who used it to further their own interests. Power and the ability to

influence things are experienced as having become detached from citizens and traditional forms of representation. This leaves us feeling disaffected and frustrated with political processes, as well as fearful because we feel things (in the social and natural world) are 'out of control'. We are uncertain and anxious about the future, and manage this anxiety by filling our time with activities and concerns that prevent us from confronting our feelings of impotence so that we could engage with and think creatively about our current atomised state. We look to religion to provide the containment and sense of identity we experienced once as children, only to find that here too, there is disillusion with a faith system that has lost its 'triadic' element, and speaks of its task as 'saving' people from things as opposed to 'revealing things'. Religion no longer 'connects' people, nor offers refuge from the daily experience of a world that increasingly operates in a paranoid-schizoid state. Members expressed an almost revolutionary hope and belief on the one hand, that communities were coming together in new formations that would lead to new political and social outcomes, (fight) and on the other, a feeling of cynicism and depression that the fragmentation they observed and experienced could be interpreted as signs of regeneration (flight). There was also a wish to break free from anonymous and repressive societal structures and to start recreating a sense of community, beginning with the sense of, and desire for community, within each one of us, as if this could restore the loss of faith, hope, trust and meaning.

Hypothesis: 'A disorientating world'

Because transnational and local political tensions are currently brought into sharp focus with daily news of scandals and sleaze involving political leaders, closely contested election results, and natural disasters, members of society have a sense that things are disintegrating and 'out of control' in an increasingly paranoid-schizoid world. We feel lost in systems and relationships that no longer offer refuge, containment and meaning, and pursue target-driven, present-orientated activities, as a defence against the unbearable feelings of impotence, loss and not knowing, and the knowledge of our vulnerability and mortality.

Convenor: Mary Joyce