

"Britain and the World at Spring 2007"

Report of a Listening Post
held on 9th May
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm
at Connaught Hall
University of London
Tavistock Square
London WC1E 7HZ



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Participants were invited in this part of the Listening Post to share their preoccupations and concerns in their various roles as citizens - family, work, study, volunteering etc. This captured a number of issues which concerned us in the world in which we find ourselves.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this part the aim was to collectively identify the main themes which emerged from this discussion. From several identified, these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

Theme 1: Boundaries and Walls

This theme contained a number of strands relating to the increasing reliance on physical barriers for protection and the lack of clear boundaries within which people feel safe.

- I have two small children - am I prepared to allow them to fall and hurt themselves? I fell out of trees when a child. Black children without a father, children without boundaries feel insecure. Taking a new direction in my life leaves me unskilled and taking risks.
- Fear of open space. Keep building walls. Iraq wall being built by occupying forces to keep Shia away from Sunni.
- I read that as a way of tackling white flight in Blackburn an architect has designed flats in Turkish style in the hope that Asians and whites will choose to live together there.
- Mental health service used to put people in beautiful asylums behind walls. Now we have released the madness into the community. We need walls.
- It is ironic that we celebrated the Berlin wall coming down. But subsequently more walls have been built, gated communities.
- My children go to school with many nationalities, but the different groups don't mix.
- My daughter in secondary school finds the racial groupings have invisible walls. School leadership contributes to this.

Theme 2: Engagement or Retreat

In this theme various ideas emerged about how people cope with the complexity and busy-ness of their lives.

- Speed of life compared with Ireland - no time to plan in busy working environment.
- My relief is in my garden where I grow things like vegetables.
- I was relieved by the energy and conflict of the French election debate and the turnout to vote. There was real argument, unlike the poverty of debate in UK.
- People don't believe in anything anymore. It is astonishing that Ian Paisley is leader of the NI assembly. Where is the passion? Unless it's money.
- I went to a Labour "Let's Talk" event. What you could discuss was very controlled - no politics.
- Children's game of statues - If you stand still long enough, it will all go away.
- The Ulster Defence Force spokesman who recently announced they are putting their weapons beyond reach was bizarrely compared to Nelson Mandela.
- I like the garden as a place of natural rhythm where I can get away from excitement.
- I don't find gardens exciting.
- I love gardening. Gardening is so slow, compared to the microsecond changes in the financial markets on the computer. A plant takes weeks to grow.
- Police took 30 long standing gang leaders associated with drugs into custody in a massive operation in north London. They were surprised that when they talked with the community they said that it was their own fault - they could have co-operated with the police and stopped the problem earlier.
- When I go on retreat, I find the stressed out part of me comes out in the space provided. Allows you to be with the madness rather than defend against it.
- We seem to retreat into gated communities or consumerism but can retreat into the inner self.

Theme 3: Transition and Anxiety

This theme included a number of examples of how a sense of risk is heightened by changes in society and uncertainty about values.

- Senior police receiving presentation on planning security for 2012 Olympics. Responded by saying 'We will not be here by then, thank goodness we're retiring'.
- I feel bombarded by unpleasant news. Before I can connect emotionally with one story, the next one hits.
- Fear put to the back of my mind when getting on the tube. How secure is it?
- Joy does not last and can immediately be blown away. Family in Portugal enjoying holiday, then child abducted.
- As a retired person in London I am enjoying the freedom to go to cultural events. On the other hand I feel disoriented by the chaos of the consumerist market where my grandchildren want the latest fashions; the stock market is rising, but is the US able to repay all its international debt?
- The cultural confusion of finding myself in Ireland in the middle of an African drumming workshop with Morris Dancers to one side.
- Mediocrity and boredom - Kate Blanchett starving herself to become a size one.
- Massacre in the US college suggests that if you stand still, you can be picked off.
- Being in Tavistock Square reminded me of the bus bombing. I wanted to find the monument to those who died; but did not find it.

- Predating the bombing, the Tavistock Park contains a statue to Ghandi and a Hiroshima memorial as part of a Peace Garden.
- The announcement that London had been awarded the 2012 Olympics was followed the next day by the London bombing - joy short lived. No joy I think for the French in the outcome of the election of Sarkozy.
- The expression comes to mind "To die for".
- Courage and lack of courage in today's paper over what someone was prepared to die for.
- What are we prepared to live for? Where's the excitement?
- There is a problem if substance and style do not consist. Talk of treating people equally in school, but then staff treating Philipinos as inferior.
- I read a recent report of a Grubb Institute study of three failing schools. They found that head teachers with a strong Christian commitment had succeeded in turning the schools around. They put it down to them making sure that verbal statements about mission were matched by consistent behaviour.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from the earlier parts 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 members were working with their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Our collective ideas and ways of thinking determine how we perceive the external realities and shape our actions towards them. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following hypothesis.

Analysis:

The fact that Connaught Hall, where we met, is in Tavistock Square featured in the initial sharing of concerns; as this was the place where the London bus bombing took place. This was associated with a memorial to those who died, and also with a statue of Ghandi and a memorial to Hiroshima which are found in the park in the square.

The development of the hypothesis referred back to Ghandi and his struggle to free India from colonial rule by non-violent resistance. This part of the conversation recognised that he was very clear about what he believed and the conviction that he could bring about change by persuading the colonial powers that they were in the wrong.

This seemed to contrast with our current state of affairs in which uncertainty about values in a multi-cultural society makes it difficult for people to act with conviction. There was some exploration of fundamentalism in which certainty is to be found (whether religious or political); but it was recognised that this was split off from the complexities which cannot be faced. There was some exploration of the meaning of political correctness which in some ways seems to paralyse positive initiative, while providing protection from stereotyping and negative behaviour. The question in people's minds seemed to be: How do you know that if you take a lead, it will achieve something good? The sudden ability of events to turn from happiness to despair seemed to be part of this thinking. The announcement of London being awarded the 2012 Olympics one day, with London being bombed the next day; sat alongside the news of the family in Portugal whose happy holiday turned into a nightmare when their daughter was abducted. There was a sense that planning against terror in our current context was

impossible. Retreat into the garden where change could be predicted if slow, was preferable to engagement in such an unpredictable, fast changing world.

The conversation was most clear about the lack of active citizenship in the UK which was contrasted with the recent French presidential elections in which there had been such a charged debate and high voter turnout. What was more difficult for the group was to identify the cause of this lack of engagement and its outcome. The hypothesis finally shaped up with the causal connection to uncertainty about our values (what we would be prepared to die for) and the consequence of wondering what happens to our anger if it is not used in constructive civic engagement.

Hypothesis:

Because we don't know what we believe any more, members of society do not engage in active citizenship (with the risks of giving offence, creating friction and intimacy), and the result is that our anger gets channelled elsewhere (for example, into boredom, fundamentalism or depression).