

"Britain and the World  
the Spring of 2009"  
Report of a Listening Post  
held in Bristol on 11th June at UWE



## 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 those 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 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

### Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this part, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Several inter-related and over-lapping themes were identified which can be grouped in the following 4 inter-related summaries.

#### 1. Controlling risk and being controlled by risk is making us less resilient

Members were preoccupied with the themes of risk and control in a number of ways: (a) environmental risk and possible catastrophe, the long-term unsustainability of our way of life; (b) our collective desire as a society to 'control everything' – as shown in the proliferation of surveillance, cameras and everyday regulatory practices which scrutinize the micro-actions of individuals, especially in their day-to-day work and even in the daily weather forecast – a futile attempt to control risk and foreclose uncertainty; (c) the belief that 'they' (government) *and we* try to 'control everything that can be controlled' because the 'real issues are too scary to think about' (so for instance we scrupulously recycle objects in the home while the bigger issues are unaddressed); (d) a paranoid fear that, like MPs, none of us would stand up well to close scrutiny and could be found seriously wanting in our work practices; (e) the futility of trying to control everything: planes drop out of the sky (a reference to a recent air crash), global markets and banks collapse etc.

Linked to this was recognition that controlling risk and being controlled by risk makes us less resilient and fills us with a sense of entitled grievance (see below). Perfectly normal and tolerable accidents cannot be tolerated, human frailties are unacceptable, nothing is our responsibility – it is 'theirs'. There is an absence of collective experience of *fear as helpful*, as a wake up call. Instead it is something to be rejected at all costs – via controlling risk.

#### 2. Disempowerment

Linked to the above over-controlled society and lack of tolerance for human frailty and 'ordinary' risk, there was anger about the tendency to 'turn everything into rules' which can be written and codified at the expense of and erosion of a sense of personal responsibility and judgment. Nothing can be just 'good enough'. Members struggled with

feelings of regression and powerlessness in the face of perceived corporate and governmental indifference. With this comes the longing for heroes and rescuers – as represented by figures such as Obama – and more prominently a deep desire to complain to 'someone' – but no-one is listening, and, there are no clear lines of accountability and responsibility. This frustration with large organisations (and government) and their seeming lack of accountability when we complain dis-empowers citizens – although it was noted that unlike in Italy when the political classes (and in particular the PM misbehaves) at least in the UK they (government) can be voted out.

### 3. The problems of taking comfort

Against such a backdrop in which, as one member put it, society is “eating itself inside out”, taking pleasure in 'ordinary' life and ordinary achievement is itself an achievement. Hanging on to a sense of self and valuing (ordinary) pleasures – neighbourliness, gardens, and the fact that *not everything is bad and corrupt* – is an effort.

And there are further problems in 'taking comfort'. Members discussed the tension between neighbourliness and concern for neighbours on one hand and snooping ('Big Brother' style) on the other. How responsible should we be for our neighbours' well-being and when does neighbourliness become surveillance and snooping? Even more complex, might it be the case that our desire to watch through the keyhole of others, so to speak, is in fact an expression of a *desire for connection* with others? Members of the group explored the idea that the very things we profess to hate – surveillance, 'Big Brother' and his micro-management of us etc – might in fact be *perverse ways of connecting with each other*. And further, taking comfort in nature and the (literal!) cultivation of one's own garden has its dark and light side. It offers a sense of pleasure and control (as against the multifarious uncertainties and risks of life) but *the primitive always breaks through*. Our experience of nature is both 'healing' and catastrophic.

### 4. The young and young men

The listening post began and ended with images of dead young men – victims of suicide or killed in the war in Iraq. In between, a mother with a young child wondered about the impact of her parenting style on her son's developing masculinity and more generally the young – particularly young men – were associated with mental illness, school failure and responding to the pressures faced by the older generation by either 'dropping out' or aspiring to a celebrity life rather than real life.

## **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 dynamics both conscious and unconscious 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 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. This analysis has been distilled into the following hypotheses.

### Analysis and Hypothesis 1

**Analysis:** The focus on young men and their problems in finding a place was an important idea in final stages of the listening post. It is as though there are *not enough sons*, we are an old society and the sons are compromised. Over-regulation too is a sign

of an ageing society. It is as though we long to pass on the responsibility for the planet to the next generation but also fear doing this: the over-regulation is a defence against 'passing it on' and illustrates the wish of the 'fathers' to retain the control they purport to repudiate or pass on. In one sense, the material generated by the listening post might be thought of as *the taking stock of a generation who has failed the up-coming generation* – leaving the mess of climate change, crashing global markets etc.

**Hypothesis:** The preoccupations with controlling risk serve to mask a deeper anxiety about destroying or diminishing future generations. This results in a feeling that we (the 'gerontocracy') have failed to 'do the job' and failed to hand on the project to the young (who we do not trust to be able to manage the risks).

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2**

**Analysis:** It is as though members of society, whilst railing against risk management and an over-controlled society also *desire* it at the same time as a way of managing experiences of uncertainty and catastrophic change. External regulation of the self has replaced internal regulation (and also undermined the fathering function). Whilst hating over-regulation, compliance with it protects one from the depressive (and paranoid) anxieties of being 'free'.

**Hypothesis:** Rapid (and largely disintegrative) social change has led to a perverse relationship with risk. We fetishise risk management and whilst also railing against it. This results in a feeling of loss of agency and authenticity in our everyday lives which we seek to fill with reparative activities (neighbourliness, gardens, nature). At the same time, these too have their 'dark' side and are compromised (see theme 3 above).

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 3**

**Analysis:** Airplanes fall out of the sky, banks collapse, the world feels fragile and precarious, we feel guilty about our collective greed and destructiveness – the same greed and destructiveness which has created this situation. This in turn leads to the desire to *do* something, to make an effort and reach out – because this restores at least *some* sense of integrity and authenticity.

**Hypothesis:** World events are experienced as 'out of control'. This evokes strong concern and anxiety and also feelings of guilt and responsibility for (a) the greed and carelessness which has got us where we are (after all, this happened on *our* watch) and (b) not seeing it coming. The feelings of guilt and responsibility are not experienced *directly* but rather show themselves in the desire for more authentic attachments to others and in the desire for lives that are more 'real'. In other words, the desire for more authentic attachments and integrity in daily life has its ultimate source in a set of submerged feelings of guilt about our *legacy*.