

**"Britain and the World
the Spring of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post
held in Manchester on 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 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.

1. Feelings of connection/ disconnection, belonging/ not belonging

Ambivalence about making the effort to connect with others. There is a profound sense of social isolation, 'community breakdown', for ourselves and others especially marginalised, foreign communities. But I feel ambivalent about the amount of connectedness I want. Some enjoy being anonymous. Some communities kill each other. Families abuse each other. In large place like Manchester it's hard for a newcomer to find a community. In small, rural areas it's easier.

The pub, as a social space, functions as a symbol of the amount of connectedness we can tolerate. We enjoy the talking but are happy to leave at the end of the evening. This feels like a fairly superficial level of connectedness.

Electronic means of communication, being busy on 'facebook', with emails, can give us an illusion of connectedness. Is this real or illusory? One person thought 'we are meant to feel this separation, it's an evolutionary thing'. It's a natural, spiritual thing.

I have different responses to contact in my professional life and at home, in my personal life. People who work intensely with people want to close the door and not see neighbours at the end of the day. We guard our privacy because our professional roles (priest, consultant, therapist) demand so much of us and yet we want to be part of the community which we at times shut out. It's hard to find a balance between professional and personal roles, to observe boundaries. Society expects us to work hard, not that we are neighbourly. We view 'foreigners' in stereotypes. It is hard to be curious about those who are different from us, hard to see the detail of others' differences.

2. Responsibility as citizens: What could/ should be done?

I feel I have to recognise what I am able to bear. Can I bear the differences between me and others? Do I want to be part of this? But this is a limited aspiration to bear things. What about changing them? Some people have revolutionary aspirations. Some people inspire action like Obama, climate change activists. We have a responsibility as the more privileged, the 'haves', to do something, to take action. We feel guilt about our privileged position.

Shock about the BNP electoral successes and fearful for safety of black friends in Leeds. Especially hard to think about children's experience of racism. I feel ashamed I forgot to vote.

There are contested ways of doing things – what is the right thing? Some disagreement about the best stance to take here. Is feeling positive, hopeful, superficial or real?

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 an hypothesis as to why they might be occurring at that moment.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Connection

Analysis: There is a yearning for connection and our idea(l) of what it is like to belong, alongside an ambivalence about connecting and what demands may follow from others that are based on self interest and are not trusted. This leads to reluctance to engage, fearing being overwhelmed or intruded upon such that a compulsive, despairing self reliance or detachment takes the place of trust and connection.

This has arisen because of an erosion of trust, a longing for authority figures that can be trusted when they have been disappointing. The question of how to be a part of society and how to make efforts to address these things is contested and fragile.

Hypothesis: We have a longing for connection with others and an idealised view of what it would be like to belong. However, we are ambivalent about connecting and fear being overwhelmed by demands of others. This has arisen due to erosion of trust by people in power alongside a desire for authority figures to invest in. The alternative is despairing self reliance.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2: Reality and Illusion

Hypothesis: We experience the absence of a trustworthy external authority, truth and lies become confused, so it becomes difficult to know what can be trusted and to take action, individually and collectively. This gives rise to feelings of guilt and that we ought to do something. We don't now trust what we believed in the past to be reliable. Complexities mean it is hard to be sure about things. This has arisen as changes to society mean that there is enough comfort and any discomfort is insufficient to pull us into action.

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