

"Britain and the World the Spring of 2009"

Report of a Listening Post
held in Oxford on 10th 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 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 'social' 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 six inter-related summaries that were also the basis of analysis and hypothesis formation.

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 trying to identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at this time, and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, the participants 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.

Theme 1: The abdication of personal responsibility, a loss of integrity and moral compass, lack of preparedness to respond to broader duties, blurring the distinction between self and others.

Analysis: In the current political climate issues of honesty and integrity are felt as very dubious. We are displacing our public anger and feelings about the recession onto MP's over the misuse of expenses issue. The public rants, bankers run for cover, and systems and organisations find ways to excuse themselves. We expect honesty and integrity, but MP's are only human, and become receptacles for our own dishonesty and lack of integrity. What about the personal application of responsibility? It seems easier to abdicate responsibility. There are complex reasons, the disconnection in our communities resonates through society and returns to impact on government creating less connection – the absence of a political container.

Henry VII, introduced the concept of magistrates as unpaid but their authority lay in their 'civic honour'. Can we re-reapply this idea to politicians, police etc?

Why did David Cameron claim £680 to have his Wisteria cut when he is so wealthy?

I did jury service and claimed no expenses.

If claiming expenses is their right then why shouldn't they? It was only £680 not several £K – it is relative to status and responsibility and a moral issue.

Pretending we can afford borrowing credit is morally wrong, but is within the law and 'the rules'. Linking responsibility and being reflective within societal norms has become more merged, amorphous, and more confusing.

We are a greedy society, I acknowledge my greed in relation to chocolate, but the greediest sector is the press. The Telegraph spent weeks finding new people to expose over expenses, it was almost parasitic, we become reflective of societies greed.

I have started to not watch the news or buy papers, I felt disgusted. Rowan Williams commented we should not allow this process of 'public hangings' to destabilise society. 'Hang and flog' – therefore vote for the BNP! How do we cope with this ambivalence and anger? There is still quality journalism, it is the manner in which things are reported that we should reflect on.

We tend to shut down and become desensitised, Baby P was too painful, but people also get carried away e.g. when Princess Di died it was reported that the 'whole country went into mourning.' In the same way, since the Catholic Church scandal, I know someone who thinks that all priests are paedophiles. We need to put the issues in perspective.

Hypothesis 1: Long term irrational social projections, about a lack of integrity and trust constantly move through society. They start as ways to criticise (and contain) the powerless, but end up undermining the powerful. Because these projections feel dangerous and are persecutory, we don't challenge them. We 'back off' and trust in action is removed. We have then accepted the projections as real, and are consumed with impotence and overwhelmed with anger.

Theme 2: Information and 'Knowing'

Analysis: Do we feed the journalists or do they feed us? They are feeding a market. Sales of the Telegraph went up 45% during the last few weeks because we wanted the scandal. Is it that, or is it because we don't question it? Why don't people question who said what about whom, about what and why!!!

How do we understand the Wisteria story, is it because Cameron is a pathological horticulturalist, or just protecting his home? We all know virtually nothing. I stayed with an MP a few years ago he had a huge daily workload of letters. Cameron's workload must be massive – so what do we really know? Like us they are too overwhelmed with the pace of everyday life, for the most part it doesn't matter as things just rush past.

Obama says something about this in the 'Audacity of Hope.' As a US citizen I'm baffled by your news. When I buy a paper, I do so in the hope that it will provide insight or to help something fall into place.

It's like working with disturbed kids, when you are 'in the moment together' – it can be very dangerous, but you find ways to communicate and new possibilities emerge. If applied to society we could say it is like culture coming out of pre-revelatory culture. It requires us to stop things in time, and reflect on the moment, even if the moment is unbearable.

We then displace the unbearable!

Theme 3: Finding meaning: the connection between self and world

Analysis: The 1997 labour victory brought tangible relief – spirits lifted. In last weeks election 'eruption', Mr Brown effectively says to us 'go back to sleep' – the brief coalescence will return to division and disconnection. It takes a special place to be able to provide the conditions for momentum, to say 'lets do our work', it takes huge energy here with the children, but let's ask how can we do it elsewhere. But it feels as though there was more energy for change then, today there is more inertia and impotency.

Back in the 1920's and 30's people were also talking about the collapse of capitalism, but out of this developed a huge diversity of new organisations. To say they 'must have' (had more potency) disconnects us from history – we are defeated so easily because we don't have the power of the past on our side. Oral history gets us into real experiences, e.g. the Ghryffyd movement – a therapeutic community for unemployed men, was a symbol of great adaptation and creative growth in the turbulence of the depression.

It is sad if we say with the benefit of hindsight that 2009 could have been a year of enormous change. Young people seem different they are very 'future driven.' They focus on 'what's next' rather than 'how did we get here?' This is my third experience of recession! I know things will improve. I am pleased my sons have experienced real unemployment, not the 'milk and honey' that many expect to be given.

Things seem very ephemeral, even gadgets don't last that long. I have to keep buying a new washing machine, and yet my brother just threw away a vacuum cleaner that lasted 35 years, it was built to 'last a lifetime'.

I was doing some family history research and realised that 'takeaway meals' were around in Victorian times, there was a pie shop at the end of the road where a factory was. Not a great deal has really changed, Dickens describes life and issues in 'Hard Times' that are the same today. Technology changes but people's social dynamics don't.

I had a solid fuel Raeburn fitted, people asked 'Why? It is so old fashioned'. But for me the reason was emotion driven, it provides a 'way of living' – warmth when you sit on it, the ability to cook, to open it etc. People don't seem to know what they feel about what they have.

We have referred to 'meaning' a lot in this discussion. I don't know if we live in a society that has a lasting collective understanding of meaning. If we live life without meaning we don't have purpose. As we evolve as people, our sense of meaning changes and clarifies, it could be the Raeburn, or Buddhism or Wii's or a Blackberry that provides meaning.

Hypothesis 2: Twenty years ago Mrs Thatcher said "there is no such thing as society," Gordon Brown last week said "if we have a general election there will be chaos." There

is little understanding and belief that citizens/communities are intelligent and have feelings. In the absence of understanding the government attempts an omnipotent control which continues across time. The government is therefore seen increasingly as 'out of touch'. These dysfunctional processes are not owned and contained, therefore pockets of 'resistance' form, hence we have the rise of the BNP, but also 'unite against fascism' throwing eggs at Nick Griffin. These new groups restore faith for communities that alternative action can be found and taken.

Theme 4: Instantaneous gratification and superficiality; a lack of collective meaning

Analysis: What I don't see now which I saw as a child is a sense of things in society which were recognisable symbols of meaning routines, rituals, activities that had meaning e.g. church, being with extended family. A child now tells you what they are getting for Xmas, rather than hoping what they might get. An absence of a collective understanding of society. In its place we have a narcissistic culture, self gratifying and individualistic.

Is it self interest for survival or the evolutionary 'pull' of the social ?

My formative adolescent years were in punk rock – we felt we could do something, each generation needs something, what have the young got now?

We've got a voracious need for instant gratification – how did we get there?

Theme 5: The crisis of having/ being which arrives at greed materialism and a mutual collusion between industry and public

Analysis: I feel the loss of religion and Sunday shopping have played their part. Sunday shopping has become the 'value', religion provided collective ritual. The new value has been credit availability, driven by increasing commercialisation, and the financial markets.

Advertising seems more pitched towards specific groups. Even on daytime TV viewers are being drawn into 'wink bingo' and 'cheeky bingo'. But that is no different from the Victorian 'penny dreadful', I think it is only the technology that changes, TV wasn't as prolific in the 60's when I grew up, but I remember seeing adverts and wanting the products.

It is the instantaneous gratification, infants need it to satiate strong feelings. We ward off difficult feelings through Bingo. There is a symbiosis between society and the corporations, and it creates feelings of fear when the symbiosis collapses economically.

I remember watching TV in the U.S. One minute there would be an advert for a fast food outlet offering 'eat all you want for \$1.50', followed by an advert for a slimming aid. The message is 'feed yourself and don't worry because there is a solution'. You can buy all you want on credit, but you might lose your home as a result.

I have always consciously avoided debt, waiting until the car packed up until we got a new one, avoiding credit cards etc. But now even students need loans.

Marketisation has become more blatant.

Things seem to now define who you are, rather than 'you' defining them. I'm enticed by sassy shoes, I don't want shoes because I'm told they're the ones I should be wearing, but because they excite me, but I often can't afford the nicest.

People believe that the high quality brand shoes say 'I belong', 'I have status'. They feel they start to 'exude meaning.'

Theme 6: Identity

Analysis: In the UK there isn't a national day, nor 'flying the flag' as in the U.S. – there is a lack of national community memory.

When the Telegraph comments on MP's expenses, the readership is grasping to find meaning, trying to find a coherent society. Disturbed children also don't want to be a mess, they are looking for meaning through difficult behaviours, attempting to find an attachment or a connection with others.

As an (arrogant) empire we ruled the waves, so that was our national identity and we had less need to define it. The U.S. needed an identity because it was a much younger nation. The first inclusion of Jewish people came with the Norman conquest, but they could only live and work in certain areas, their 'place' defined their collective identity.

I interviewed an elderly man who wanted to sing me the 'Empire Day song'. By losing the empire we lost the rituals. The BNP offers a substitute but distorted version of this identity. But there are pockets of 'reclamation', creativity and 'resistance' e.g. the move towards food production; growing vegetables, keeping poultry in gardens and allotments and unused land, buying locally sourced foods. These attempt to reclaim more traditional values offer the opposite of corporate McDonalds.

Culture always reinvents itself. We see Nick Griffin saying 'culture must be like this', the BNP attempt a concrete definition of what our culture should be. In 10 years time when everyone keeps chickens, the young will be saying why keep chickens when you can buy a cooked one for £3 in the supermarket? – ideas revolve cyclically.

If we feel people aren't informed then we are abdicating our responsibility to keep ourselves informed. We need to keep ourselves informed to make choices.

Hypothesis 3: Disillusion in the government as a mature containing parental structure, creates pockets of resistance, reclamation of aspects of culture, return to traditional values on a smaller scale: a search for a new identity. This disillusionment requires us to explore relationships on different terms, we become an 'adolescent' society, mistrustful of our parents, and seeking our own communities/factions. Like adolescents, in this process we also have to learn new skills and develop a new mature (reflective) understanding. The new 'reclaimed'communities become pockets or symbols of hope for change.

Convener: John Diamond