

"Britain and the World at Summer 2010"

Report of a Listening Post
held in London 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 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.

1. Media overload and different 'truths'

There were various expressions of concern about the media overload and about 'what is the reality' being conveyed. New communications and intrusive media are also re-shaping our connections. Discomfort was expressed at unsolicited emails from politicians. There was a sense that this appearance of 'dialogue' was merely a cover. The 'we are all in this together' mantra was also not born out by the focus on cutting public sector needing to 'tighten its belt' alongside the continuation of excess of private consumption.

Some people felt it was difficult to know what to believe in watching the news. For some, trust had given way to a growing mistrust of the news media after seeing that that the 'truth' was a distortion of what was going in particular situations of which they had other knowledge. Attention was drawn to the way the BBC mis-represented stories such as the recent Greek riots, the previous New Orleans floods and most recently the Israeli's attack on the Gaza flotilla. It was felt that the viewer was presented with the opposite of what happened.

2. Fear of the unknown

A few members expressed optimism that the liberal democrats were now in the Coalition and would act as a break on a repeat of the Thatcherism of the 1980-90's. For others, a sense of hope and creativity around the recent election was outweighed by a return to 'business as usual' such as by the banks. One member commented, that this short sightedness suggested the crisis of capitalism hadn't been deep enough to bring about any real change. Other members commented that we are in a state of denial about the economic crisis we face and wanting to believe everything is fine. Another added we get the politicians we deserve – ie if they speak the truth to us it doesn't get them elected. We prefer our delusions.

A fear was also strongly expressed that the economic fragility in the wider EU and Greece in particular, pointed to the real threat of an economic catastrophe if the Euro were to implode. In this scenario our taken for granted social stability could slide away and the political consequences would be massive social disorder. The potential seriousness of the situation and how it parallels and replicates what happened in the run up to the advent of Nazi Germany was emphasised by several members. In other EU states there are acute societal splits eg around language in Belgium and also illiberal and authoritarian political decisions being reported around religious dress codes in several EU states like Holland.

Alternative strategies were expressed in the stance taken towards the future of the welfare state in particular in response to the crisis.

3. Individualism

A member asked whether 'Whitehaven' was a sign of a broken society although others thought it spoke more to the fact that 1 in 4 have mental health problems which society doesn't want to talk about. One person asked whether there was a parallel with 'broken' oil wells in the Gulf of Mexico – meaning a loss of precious resources and wild life but also loss of share price (with ultimately a major impact on UK pensions). It was pointed out that similar oil spills went unreported in other parts of the world like Nigeria. One member described how BP had pursued short term profit by compromising safety and it had widely outsourced roles to other companies. This fragmented business model was also a reminder of how the privatised UK rail system a decade ago was similarly underpinned by fragmented ownership, loss of shared values a low commitment to safety and how the rail system collapsed and the company was re-nationalised.

There was some pre-occupation with the relevance of climate change to the discussion and of how the rich would be hit hardest if cutting back on lifestyles and self denial were to be seriously addressed. It was thought there was a blindness on the part of the rich who seemed incapable of addressing the necessary change for themselves. Instead, a ruthless, callous, self interest reigned. The question was also posed as to whether this sense of ruthless action also extended to the 'Whitehaven' killings, the Israeli attack on the Gaza flotilla, as well as the BP oil spill. Were the deaths in all these cases a consequence of deliberate ruthless action, (planned murders and assassination) rather than merely random acts?

Ruthlessness also emerged equally an aspect of our own struggles to find work and knowingly take on a remunerative contract even when it compromised our values. Recent research about dating sites also showed that male partners were going on dating sites *before* breaking up. This led on to comments about a hatred of dependence and intolerance of ambivalence.

4. A sense of disconnection and absence of feeling

One member described a profound sense of disconnection and loss of a capacity to feel and to be moved by events: a sense of "retreating to the bottom of the garden". There was a sense of not having real feelings about key events. They had become merely 'spectacles' raising questions as to what is real? Others spoke of being overwhelmed – as a parent, as a volunteer, in seeking clients, of being a concerned citizen. It was suggested that 'too much choice' now faced one as an individual. It was all 'too big for our minds' to think about.

Feeding the 24/7 beast of work plus a culture of “blaming others rather than one of co-responsibility” or of taking action and responsibility was now dominant. It means that we are ‘sitting on our fingers’ and that there is a deep sense of ‘alienation in society’.

5. A sense of being out of control

In an opening contribut a member recalled visiting IMAX and viewing sharks under the sea and of helping the coral reef to sustain itself as it reaches a tipping point.

The impact of the volcanic eruption in Iceland was raised briefly which reminded members how it impacted on us all and how we couldn’t predict its further return or consequences. There was a sense of being forced by natural events into a state of not knowing challenging our hubris.

One member, reminded us how that there is a shift in the balance of global power away from the west going on under the surface of events. There was a reference to the import of drugs from China as a deliberative act.

Community action was raised as generating good feelings and can feel heroic but does it cross over to walking down the street and relating to a homeless person ?

Closing comments included “this government can’t dig me out of a hole” and the need to avoid the short termism of ‘shoot the fox’ (a reference to the recent very rare attack on children within their home which became equated to a pack of wolves). Finally, a member asked is what is happening just all ‘too big for our minds’ to be able to make sense of it?

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.

The convener started the session by asking what is going on in our minds that we are pre-occupied by these themes.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Ruthlessness

Analysis: The views that were expressed in Part 1 and 2 varied. Some were expressing more optimism and an active sense of agency. But the predominant sense was that of a confusion due to the complexity of life, its fragmentation and an inability to think due to fear of the unknown. A lack of containment and an acceptance of the self interest and hyper individualism of late capitalism was also noted. There were key references to an absence of the capacity to feel in the face of events; of feeling overwhelmed and therefore of the incapacity to take action. There were references to ‘retreating to the bottom of the garden’ and of taking ‘garden leave’.

It was noted that if we retreat into our own individual worlds we also retreat into an enjoyment of our isolation and ruthlessness. This was variously interpreted as 'denying our dependency needs'. As a consequence of greater education we have emerged as a society that is less deferential, but we are actually dependent as a society on opiates to function. These are imported drugs on the streets (with some suggestion of deliberative strategy by the Chinese), but also opiates of our minds – a media that is simplifying and compartmentalising our social life as in 'spectacles' which distorts the 'truth' of events and any sense of the authentic. As a consequence we do not comprehend the realities of the world we are enabling into being. This inevitably feeds our state of anxiety and uncertainty and in turn it was noted itself fuels forms of social control by government and corporations. Our politicians are increasingly drawn from the gene pool of PR and the media and appear as shiny but not quite 'real' or authentic. As a consequence we can freely project our felt needs into them and we punish those politicians who now lack these 'as if' communication skills.

Hypothesis: Because of the complexity and fragmentation of modern life, we are increasingly retreating into our own individual worlds dependent on opiates of one kind or another to function without feeling. This results in a disavowal of our dependency needs and an acceptance of an increased ruthlessness in how we relate to one another.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

A collapse of shared symbolisation

Analysis: There has been a loss of common systems of symbolisation or unconscious shared meanings about our society. This is due in part, to the marginalising of mainstream religion and once common place symbolic ways of thought (although the unexpected resurgence of newer faith groupings is modifying this and trusted brands also provide some substitute focus). The disintegration of our post war belief in the idea of a welfare state surfaced in the discussion at different points as a key loss of shared symbolisation. The assumptions of interdependence which the idea of a welfare state once embodied are now embattled as market driven thinking comes to further dominate political economy. The new government is embarking on a radical cutting of public sector institutions in which the welfare state is not just being critiqued as inefficient and needing to change, but is being rejected (and even mocked) by the parts of society which are unwilling to vote for the increased taxation needed to maintain it.

At the same time we are entering a period of potential social unrest due to the severity of the global economic crisis. This is a reminder of some of the key reasons why a welfare state came into being ie as a political settlement between capital and the then labour movements threats of social unrest. Members were reminded that the conditions which led to the rise of fascism in the 1930s were an alienated young, workless, male working class. This clearly has a resonance with what is beginning to happen currently such as the opposition to the current structural adjustment programmes in Greece and a foretaste of things to come in the UK. In this situation a key barrier to societal disintegration will be sustained support for the idea of a welfare state based on notions of interdependence such as good health care for all unlike in the US model. In this scenario it was thought a key question will be whether defense spending or going to war remain untouchable?

Hypothesis: We seek stable structures and symbols of this but because of our retreat into individualism we are experiencing the loss of a deeply shared and unconscious symbolisation about our idea of society. The welfare state in particular, despite its inadequacies, represents one kind of shared, mobilising fiction which has symbolised our societal and human interdependence for over half a century. If this is further undermined politically it will destabilise key structures necessary to mitigate any potential social unrest arising from the economic crisis making us less stable as a society and more fearful.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Our denial of responsibility

Analysis: ‘This government can’t dig me out of a hole’ and the need to ‘shoot the fox’ were indicators of how as a society we seek to blame first or look to the authorities to control nature on our behalf – rather than take responsibility for our own agency or lack of it. It was pointed out that we get the politicians and the media truths we deserve ie their inadequacies are also a reflection of our lack of challenge and the way we fail to take responsibility eg we compromise our values eg to win a contract, or by watching forms of media which feed our prejudices.

A observation drawn from recent research about dating sites drew attention to how male partners in relationships were going on dating sites *before* breaking up. This prompted comments about a hatred of dependence and our ambivalence to it.

One member described the return of creativity which flowed from doing a green MBA, with a reconnection with the capacity to play with ideas being key. But to do it required effort and taking up this course overseas.

Hypothesis: Because of feelings of vulnerability we seek to blame others and to deny our individual responsibility and agency. This results in our passing pity for the ‘poor’ alongside our blaming the rich. This is not to deny the capacity of the powerful to impose their will but it is to emphasise that when we allow ourselves to become passive, silent bystanders, we are actually colluding with that power structure.

Convener: Ursula Murray