

"Britain and the World

Autumn 2005"

Report of an Autumn Listening Post
held on Wednesday 12th October 2005

at Connaught Hall

University of London

Tavistock Square

London WC1E 7HZ



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 Part Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Several themes were identified by the members and these have been distilled into three major themes as below.

a) Paranoia Making Thinking Impossible

Anger related to paranoia of terrorism. There was a feeling of living in the grip of terror. There was a difficulty in finding a place to get a grip of oneself. It was felt that paranoia makes thinking impossible. The complexity of thinking was such that it led to a flight from thinking. There was a fear of the threat of an enemy outside. The number of natural disasters reported that week added to the fears. Such is the pain associated with disasters that we cannot bear to think about them. One member stated that they felt no emotion re all the natural disasters - sees them, thinks how awful and moves on. Another stated they were sick of disasters - familiarity breeds contempt. Disaster or terror - we have got to have the gloom to wipe out our capacity to think. Another member stated that the week after the London bombs they were very afraid of being killed. On this occasion when I returned to London I was afraid of being arrested - like the foreign journalist who was arrested, kept in a cell, swabs taken, before he was released. Another member was walking by the USA Embassy and became aware that they could be arrested for acting suspiciously. Another member stated that his family live in Lisbon and because Portugal supported the invasion of Iraq he was concerned that his government should be more careful re safety - because his family and friends live there.

b) Dislocation Resulting in Insecurity

The current environment was seen as one of dislocation and insecurity. There was a loss of a known framework, this led to the fear of isolation and vulnerability. One way of coping was disengagement - which was seen as a sort of paralysis - a polarised state. Fear of the unfamiliar results in a risk of losing the 'key' to understanding. A member spoke of being concerned with the destructiveness in the world. We are living in a world

where everything is in a state of chaos and upheaval. Another commented on their concern regarding drink and drugs and the destruction of brain cells which cannot recover. Another related to their concern with huge destruction in Pakistan and an inability to respond. Things are rather polarised. I was thinking of the endangered bird life inherent in the Olympic bid and having difficulty in saying 'what about the regeneration that will be brought to the area'. People are so uncourageous at the moment. There are so many complex views and the community is pushed into splitting.

I am working with a collection of people running a consultancy project on working together across cultures. I believe there is inherent racism in the way the course is set up. I speak to it but repeatedly feel out of accord with the others. And then I ask myself 'am I missing the point somehow.' I feel disturbed here because we are a white European group. (Not quite) That makes me think about the child being pulled out of the earthquake rubble by a mixed team of rescuers. We are preoccupied with death and destruction - yet we live in relatively peaceful times. Can we learn from past disasters? I am thinking of Turkey. They are responsible for genocide in the past but now want to be a member of the Europe Team. What does it mean to forget the genocide? What would it mean to remember? With the IRA bombings we just got on with our everyday lives. Another member stated that she had come to this country 5 months ago from Australia and was still experiencing strangeness. She was experiencing grief at giving up her family and friends. Nothing is familiar - no sense of belonging anywhere. We cling to the familiar. When the familiar is stripped away one is left feeling very vulnerable.

c) Inauthentic Political Leaders

There was a view that politicians in power are not trustworthy people. They are engaged in inauthentic politics using pseudo communications. There is a lack of trust in political leaders. It was felt that they are not taking care of things properly eg. global warming - instead they pursue their own interests leading to paranoia about terrorism. Members were concerned with the language our politicians are using, for example you can be arrested for the 'glorification of terrorism'. How do you define that? It was felt that this was merely scapegoating - putting things out of sight. At the same time there was a need for respect for liberty and the wish to be kept safe.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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 the 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 three hypotheses that emerged after a difficult struggle, were linked by a strong sense of society being in a state of tumultuous change arising from changes in:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

The overriding preoccupation of the participants of this Listening Post was concerned

with the London bombings and the societal response to terrorism since. It was felt that the societal response to terrorism since July 7th 2005 is that of mass paranoia fed by our politicians concerns and actions for security and safety. 'I might be dead' and 'I am afraid of living'. 'I might be arrested'. The kind of world we would like to live in - liberal, more diverse, more inclusive is being threatened. The societal response to terrorism is leaving us more fearful of normal individual connectedness; psychic space is restricted inhibiting ordinary engagement in the 'fish and chip shop and the pub'. 'We have lost feeling good and comfortable' in our communities. It was recognised that there was nothing easy about cross cultural issues. Individually we each struggle with the conflicting primitive needs to merge and be the same as and to be separate and different. 'I am living alongside of you but I belong to a different group'. Our external and internal worlds reflect and influence each other. The FÖ_ societal response to terrorism since July 7 gives permission for the worst aspects of our society to come out. Perhaps this is a good thing. 'Safer when feelings are made overt'. 'More problematic when they are covered up'. But can they be usefully thought about rather than enacted?

Hypothesis:

That the paranoid societal response to terrorism since July7 serves the purpose of taking flight into mindless actions and law making as a societal defence against meaningful thought and this is because we as a society are, in this instant, at least, fearful of the process of thinking and what we might have to think about and engage with.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

Following on from the above and linking to it is our analysis of the fears associated to engaging in a thinking process in relation to terrorism and the consequences of the London bombs. Paranoia makes thinking near impossible. So what is it that we do not want to think about and which in itself is so terrifying? Thinking allows us to do our best. The problem is that our best may not be good enough. The societal response to terrorism is leading to fragmentation which in turn prevents us from seeing the beginning, the source of terrorism - the reasoning behind it. It stops us thinking and asking the question why? The terrorists feel they are 'soldiers at war' and doing their job. But what is the objective of their war?. Our guilt and responsibility in relation to what is happening in the world is too difficult to live with so we push it into an outside source and become the victim. As one participant put it 'owning my own difficult feelings about what is happening in the world is hard. I know people in Africa are starving and dying of disease in their thousands. And I am appalled at the greed and grabbing of resources and which I want stopped. Yet I seem to have found a place to live with that'. Who is protesting against the 90 days detention? Can those who hold to a middle ground find a way to manage their fears of isolation and vulnerability and discover the courage to make their voice heard? Because we have lost our bearing Society tries to find simple answers. The question 'why' is an impossible question. To begin to answer it we would need to know so much, because the answer is so steeped in the past. But because we do not think carefully enough of the issues we end up with societal paranoia led and fed by our politicians. The alternative is not to ask the question 'why' in the first place. It is painful to think about these issues because there are so many different and conflicting views from which to choose. How can we stay engaged in a thinking process and not fragment? (Can the thinking process itself take care of something for us and make a difference whether there is an overt outcome or not? Rather like an unanalysed dream.)

Hypothesis:

Society's response to terrorism since 7/7 is serving a double purpose:

1. It maintains Society in the role of victim of terrorism. In maintaining the role of victim Society defends itself from facing responsibility in regard to the source of terrorism, and which Society might have to face if there were to be any real engagement with the question 'why'.
2. It serves as a preoccupying displacement from confronting the global issues of global warming, poverty and disease. A preoccupation with terrorism which unites much of the world's leaders serves to hide from view the more divisive confrontation concerning the global issues of climate warming, poverty and disease. And this is because if we really engaged with these issues further than just naming them and leaving them to the voice of celebrities we would have to sacrifice the 'good and comfortable' way of western life or our own guilt and helplessness in doing nothing. In maintaining the role of victim Society defends itself from facing responsibility in regard to the source of terrorism, and which Society might have to face if there were to be any real engagement with the question 'why'.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3***Analysis:***

Standing like bookends the opening and closing statements of this Listening Post spoke to a dilemma between the older generation and young people. The opening remark concerned an (active, older person) who spoke to his preoccupation with his forthcoming retirement. The Listening Post's closing comment referred to the absent voice of young people. On two or three occasions during the course of the Listening Post a reference to the absent voice or unintelligible voice of young people seemed to be dropped into the discussion in a seemingly disconnected way. As if they were serving the purpose of flight from whatever we were closing in on. Or were the young people themselves the issue that the Listening Post was repeatedly putting into the room and flying from pursuing it? Has a collusive situation developed between the young and the old. Older people are accused of not listening to the young but when they do they find they do not have the same language in which to communicate. Young people fly with IT while the older generation mostly struggle with it and are often dependent on their kids to show them how.

Hypothesis:

It is very difficult to communicate in any meaningful way between the older generation and the young because of the painful negotiations that would have to take place concerning the complex legacy of the future and involving sacrifice, guilt and responsibility, and the envy of each position. Society's response to terrorism is a displacement of the fear and anxiety in relation to what is happening to our planet and which will affect the future of our young people who do not have a voice, or at least not a voice that is able to be heard.