

Britain and the World at Autumn 2013

Report of a Listening Post held in London on 2nd October



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, neighborhood, leisure or voluntary organisations; as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called the 'stuff of people's everyday lives', that relate to the socio or external world of the participants.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. There was quite a sense of fragmentation and overwhelm with the number of themes emerging: in this complexity, where shall we start? From the multiple themes presented, we have drawn together the following interrelated overarching themes:

Theme 1: World of contrasts: Masculine vs. Feminine, Not Caring vs. Caring, Having Vs. Not Having, Doing vs. Reflecting, Logos vs. Eros

There seems to be a yin-yang pull in the world today, and it can come under many names or facets: rational vs. emotional, systematization vs. direct connection, masculine vs. feminine etc. Male vs. female, not caring vs. caring, having vs. not having, prose (England) vs. poetry (Ireland), poverty vs. punishment, passing from one state to another and how to maintain a balance whilst doing that, imbalance between the left and right hemispheres. The problem lies in balancing these two states, in moving from one to the other. Under this black and white perception of the world, caring activities (which traditionally fall in the women's remit) are devalued, can be done by anybody, with no skills. And if anyone has needs, there must be something wrong with them. Any woman with several children only gave birth to them for the benefits. This is about male domination, rather than left or right-wing politics. In France the food in hospitals is good and is considered to be part of the treatment, discussed with a nutritionist and adapted to the patient. Here the staff preparing the food are not qualified and it's the same for everybody. This is the result of increased privatization of crucial aspects of the NHS – anything beyond the purely medical has been outsourced. And even within the medical, we have competition between consultants and the one with the loudest voice wins, not necessarily in the best interests of the patient. So care, compassion and humanity get overruled by bureaucracy, box-ticking and targets.

What's happened to the human/humane part of care – we've all fallen in love with technology. Let's sack 1000 real people so we can get computers to do the

diagnosis. Another example of the lack of care is that woman on trial now for neglecting her child. Yet society doesn't care for its families – the breakdown of the family unit hasn't helped – but society is also making it harder for the family to care for grandparents or for vulnerable children. Or at the very least not helping.

Political rhetoric tends to mix up situations and causes. A few decades ago, the medical psychologists were not very helpful, so psychiatrists worked directly with social workers to reconstruct families. So it angers me to hear the Prime Minister do a token praise and talk about resurrecting social workers – after they have done their best to destroy them. Social workers work very hard and have to do all the administrative work themselves. They are the ones embodying the care that society seems to have done away with, in looking after each other.

When we first started out in psychiatric services, there was a huge enthusiasm for preventative care and lots of training for us, but it all fizzled away. At that time, we all wanted to be part of that and supported it, but when Thatcher did away with the GLC, all of the services collapsed and were never resuscitated. In nursing, the Matrons and Sisters were gorgons, but hugely respected and checking up on things on their watch. Now the enterprises are 'doing away with all that rubbish', the softy-fuzzy stuff.

Theme 2: Anger, Punishment and Envy

It seems to be so trivial – it's all about relabeling and vocabulary. But it couldn't be more untrivial. Social security is being relabeled as welfare, rise of the right in places like Italy and Greece, we are seeing American Republican extremism and its consequences. And here in the UK we see the vilification of the most vulnerable members of society – the young, the unemployed – expecting them to provide care in peoples' homes, without safeguards or CRB checks or proper training. This is all about game playing and party politics. We don't expect it will go any further, but the very fact that they are suggesting such things is indicative of how society is objectifying certain of its members. This vicious rhetoric which criminalises vulnerable members of society seems to indicate real anger or fear. Why so punitive? Perhaps a connection with envy? Most people have boring jobs which don't really make a difference. In education and healthcare the jobs themselves are intrinsically interesting, so you need to be paid less because you get moral rewards. While other jobs are so boring that you need to pay yourself more to put up with them. This is a mischievous look at the world, but feels like may be accurate.

Yet the opposite also holds true – the public sector also enjoys huge sympathy for its lack of resources, and manages to get away with being less accountable than the private sector. Don't you feel that society is more punitive of other industries, such as banking – while overall people have a lot of sympathy towards the overworked health services, so they are allowed to get away with things. Until an example is made out of them, it will be difficult to get that sense of accountability.

After the exposures at Basildon Hospital, where thousands died unnecessarily, there was a big hoo-ha, but the final conclusion was that it was 'wrong' to pick individuals

to stand trial. That surely sends the message that doctors can kill people in the name of the system and face no retribution, without having to be held accountable.

The view of 'rational economics' of free markets has trumped Keynesian economics, which made no bones about naming 'greed'. The recent adulation of Thatcher at the party conference was indicative of the idealization of market freedom.

But privatization and free markets are incompatible with public services. My mother was recently in hospital and I had to be there 9 hours a day to make sure things went well. I know that they are short-staffed and overworked, so I make no claims it is representative of what is happening overall, but while I was there, I saw so many staff doing very little. And worse things are happening in prisons – prisoners are just left there, the medical staff are not adequately trained or supervised. Society just doesn't want to take responsibility.

At the same time, contract workers in the health services are not given the chance to perform well. The most difficult and routine work is contracted out to the lowest bidder, they all work with zero-hour contracts, vulnerable workers are doing it with no training on less than 5 pounds an hour – it is all about barely meeting minimum criteria, so how can you expect it to be high quality? How did that happen? 20 years ago, there were all those abuse cases in children's homes, which are resurfacing now as scandals. It turns out that inspections were going on, but they were ineffective. My fear is same thing is happening today: the care agencies either don't know what is going on or they don't care because they are corrupt and only interested in quick money.

Chancellor got his calculations wrong, but he blames the past government for everything. The Labour government may have plenty to be blamed for – they allowed lending to get out of hand. Yet this blame game - who inherited which system - is not constructive.

Schuld – meaning both guilt and debt in German – implications of that upon German saving habits and their perception of other nations.

Theme 3: Loss of family and community; lack of leadership

The lack of care also is a direct consequence of the fragmentation of society and erosion of authority. In the NHS, for example, there used to be the Matron or the Ward Sister in charge, but I saw recently an old lady in a hospital bed. They had set lunch on the table at the bottom of the bed, without caring if she could not reach it, without stopping to help her. It's this lack of care – care-**less**-ness which is frightening.

We have been talking throughout about individual and society, but have made no reference to communities – why not? There is a lack of community. People no longer come together because of fears, lack of money, of time – we have become competitive in a purely dyadic way.

If you have an idea of the society you want, you can change it, but communities don't come together anymore. The rallying cry of the American society – absolute freedom to do whatever you please – is very appealing and so many have bought into it: everyone wants to be free. It's been exploited by financiers and this government also believes in economic freedom and everybody who is not close to them is not deserving of care. Best example is bedroom tax. Vulnerability is shameful and needs to be kept in-house. On the outside you need to be perceived as omnipotent. But of course there are gaps, cracks between perception and reality, there is lack of respect for class, gender, disability and these are the cracks where greed comes in. Greed becomes the primary motivator.

Are we doing enough as concerned individuals, who have certain views? We seem to be paralysed by the system. We need to become whistleblowers and dare to name things, even if we are isolated voices.

This upsurge in prosecutions against men who were abusing children 20 years ago: not sure what to think about that – have attitudes changed? Is society becoming more corrupt, so more cases are popping up or are we getting better at winking them out, have attitudes changed? Are there fewer or more such cases around today?

Increasing homelessness, poor parenting skills, no extended families around to help – children end up experiencing a lot of cruelty and pass that on. Also, our knowledge of what a child needs has developed. In Ancient Greece pedophilia was legitimized as a form of education and social networking – the handsome boys had the best mentors. We need to ask ourselves: what kind of adults do we want to raise? Children are not experiencing real love and care, so they cannot pass it on to others.

A baby's brain develops from affection, from positive social interaction with the primary carer – usually the mother, so you need to work with families from birth. Sue Gerhardt says something which is perhaps not politically correct anymore: a child

needs a mother and a father, it has become unacceptable to say that. Donald Winnicott may be viewed as over-idealistic about parental love, but he too was bang-on about the importance of having two parents, about the power of love between two imperfect people, good-enough parenting.

Lack of leadership at global level. Obama has been a big disappointment – he was expected to change things. And the fact that he can't or won't is bad news for EU, UK, and rest of the world – what happens in US has a knock-on effect. Obama's weakness is reminiscent of Clinton sending the missile to an empty factory after a bombing in Kenya- - just to be seen to be doing something, rather than really achieving anything.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 2, with a view to collectively identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypothesis as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members are working more with what might be called their psycho or internal world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking both determine how they perceive external realities and shape their actions towards them. Two interrelated hypotheses emerge from the analysis phase.

Analysis: Eros - the enjoyable connection between people and communities vs. Logos – rational , systemic, external. The masculine, 'hard' society is implicit in the Tory party rhetoric ;only for hardworking people', as if work is the only value that matters. On the other hand, female values of love and caring are perceived as far less important, even weak. Love and connectivity have been replaced by lack of trust, outsourcing and professionalization of care, systems and processes, and all this has increased the polarization of society rather than bringing people together. There is almost a disassociation from the need to love and care, because we pay for it – arm's length caring, perhaps. The fear of not having, of being left behind, has perhaps resulted from bad experiences in the past and we are now obsessed with the need to protect young children from the pain of poverty, as if not having is something to be avoided at any cost. Therefore working and having a job becomes most important thing, regardless of the intrinsic value of that job, and we value that over caring for others and enjoying community life. Ambition can be both positive and negative, but it often feels like it has transformed into greed nowadays and that once you reach top of the tree, you no longer feel the moral obligation to look after others? There seems little attempt made to 'give anything back to society'.

Hypothesis: Because we have experienced so much loss and poverty in the recent past, the Western world is now obsessed with work, money, progress and targets, with the results that it has no time to care or truly connect. It has been able to create an easier way of life and buy care for its people, but in the process has created a monstrous system which inhibits real feelings, has destroyed traditional family life and can no longer pay for itself.

Analysis: In an attempt to make sense of the vituperative rhetoric which is engulfing the country, not just political discourse, we came to the conclusion that envy and anger seem to be the predominant feelings. Envy was defined as feeling that something else is always better, that constant craving for something different, new, the next thing. The envy and resulting competitiveness – could they stem from our inability to cope with the shortness of life, with loss and death? Perhaps that is also the reason for the real anger we display against professional carers – could it be guilt attribution, because we are not caring for our nearest and dearest ourselves? How do we deal with this and other uncomfortable truths? We envy, blame and punish others, we create overcomplicated systems for our protection, so that we don't have to face our own true selves and our truths. The basic human value of love means allowing people to make mistakes, accepting them with their faults. Truth is not always beautiful, it also has its warts – but if we love someone, we accept them warts and all. Nowadays, it seems to be all about perfection, being pretty, immaculate, expecting the best, being happy all the time. It is impossible to admit failure or sadness or vulnerability. If things don't live up to these impossible standards, we seek to instantly punish or vilify, instead of reframing, rethinking or working on it. You can see that in couples' relationships, or in our attitude to Europe – we don't get on, we just want to walk off. And technology allows us to keep love at arms' length – we think we are close to our dearest, but we are actually communicating with them only via technology. Add to that also how pressed we are for time: we expect everything 5 seconds ago, mothers expect to bond with their newborns instantly, we no longer have the patience to allow physical time and space to grow relationships, to give and receive love safely.

Nowadays radical change seems impossible, no chance of reaching that tipping point with leadership to create a new balance, such as happened with the abolition of slavery. Cynicism is not the best frame of mind to achieve radical change. Tension/difficulty about coming to terms with history and the present, we are confused about the future.

Hypothesis: In a vain attempt to assuage our pain and justify our lack of emotional involvement, we are absolving ourselves of the responsibility of care and love through systematization, physical distancing and payment, yet we cannot rid ourselves of our guilt, which resurfaces as envy, anger and willingness to blame others when things goes wrong.

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