

**Britain and the World  
at Autumn 2014  
Report of a Listening Post  
held in London on 8<sup>th</sup> October**



## **Encouraging The Reflective Citizen**

### **Part 1: The sharing of preoccupations and experiences**

In this part of the Listening Post, participants were invited for the first hour 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 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. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

#### **Theme 1: Relating to what you do not understand**

Conflicts around the world such as China v Japan, India v Pakistan, Iran's nuclear intentions, ISIL and various terrorist threats are unpredictable but we know there are lots of potential problems. It seems even the security experts did not anticipate Al Queda and ISIL or whatever they are called – Islamic State, IS, ISIL. Islamic State in Levant. Greece was part of Levant at one time. We don't even know what to call them. Can something not exist until it is named? What do they call themselves? We may not use their name but give them ours. How did they get modern tanks? They captured the American tanks from the Iraqi army.

It's not only the terrorist threat which creates uncertainty, there is also economic instability such as in Brazil. A few years ago they were doing well, but now that there is economic downturn in other parts of the world, their raw materials have dropped in value and they are not doing at all well because of that.

What is the history of the Levant? How far back in history are we going – 1914? It goes back to the Industrial Revolution. Islam spread into many countries as a result of the Industrial Revolution. I think it goes back to when they started drawing boundaries on maps.

Instability abroad may be connected with instability at home. The Scottish referendum on independence seems to have uncovered a major dissatisfaction with the existing political leadership. This is not just confined to Scotland. There's the potential referendum on Europe. What on earth would happen if the vote was to leave?

I go fishing with my eleven year old son. We always meet with this rather large, quite intimidating looking foreign man who is also fishing there. I have a regular conversation with him about fishing but I don't understand a word he says. We have found a way of understanding each other nevertheless. My wife now says “Take care” when I go out, which she never used to say. There is the Ebola epidemic which is also a cause of uncertainty. There is a desire to shut off from sources of infection.

I was reading about an experiment in Australia where two actors were set up to racially abuse two other actors to see what the general public would do. In each case the public reacted to the abusers and came to help the abused.

I find it difficult to keep up with the news – although I spend a good deal of time reading papers. The media cover the Russian threat to the Ukraine and then that disappears and the focus is on Syria and ISIL. Then Kevin Pieterse seems to take over the headlines. It's what sells newspapers. Newspapers do not invest much in foreign correspondents in the way they did. Twitter has become the source of news. ISIL have been clever at using social media. People thought Twitter could prevent disasters by alerting the world to what is happening, but that was proved wrong. There's the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls which were in the news but that's now dropped off. New technology has changed the way news is managed because the old way is not profitable. As citizens we need news and analysis to help us form our own views. But now you can post something on YouTube, there is no editing, and it runs immediately. But it's not always reliable. You cannot know who the author is and build up a relationship of trust as you did with your favourite reporters or commentators.

Image of a beheading is a powerful image. So barbaric that you cannot think about it. There was Sergeant Rigby killed in broad daylight on a high street. Look at history, there have always been massacres, beheadings, atrocities of war. The cycle of reporting has changed. In the Vietnam war barbaric images were transmitted. Now sanitised images have replaced them. I heard the deputy war minister in Israel in a matter of fact way saying that war has no boundaries and children will get killed.

Do we expect clean wars? Rules of war are being ignored. Nobody abides by them. But ISIL is waging a conventional war rather than a hit and run type warfare.

Murder and killing seem a long way off from Tavistock Square here. But if someone attacked my family in front of me, I would have a murderous reaction. We do things which set up resentment. Balfour set up the Jewish Protectorate – deeply resented. There's the Scottish resentment of the English. If it weren't for Gordon Brown and the Daily Mail the vote may have gone the other way.

My car broke down the other day which caused a bit of a tailback. There was real fury on the faces of the drivers as they went past because they had been inconvenienced. Some wound down their windows and shouted.

My first student job was doing a road traffic survey on the M25 which caused a tailback. They were really angry with me. Are we closer to the edge – violence just under the surface? Is it any worse now? There are well established experiments which show that in a role play anger is only just below the surface.

But our cities now are much safer. Crime levels have been dropping in recent years. Non violent crime has decreased. But women do experience violence. This has led to a lot of activism and participation – leadership coming from a different place.

I still get 3 or 4 calls a day about PPI. Not sure that it will ever stop.

## **Theme 2: Socialisation takes place not only in the local community but in a global context.**

I am doing quite a bit of training with the NHS addressing worries about how the younger generation perform in the workplace. On the one hand, they are very quick learners and ambitious to do well. But there is a problem that they sometimes misjudge situations and find it difficult to respond well to colleagues or patients. Generation Y – the under 30's – have spent a lot of time growing up in their bedrooms on their computers and not always well adjusted socially.

I have a worry about increased use of technology by young people instead of relating face to face. My grandsons are 2 and 4 years old and the 4 year old is already on a laptop.

My 11 year old son argued to have an iPad because all his friends have them and he would be isolated without. He spends a lot of time playing games. But he has allowed his sister to join him in one of the games which allows you to build your own world and populate it with people and animals. So in some ways it is quite creative – although he did brick up his sisters house so that she couldn't see anything when she switched on.

My parents used to complain about the amount of time I spent on the telephone. People will use whatever technology is available. They actually use the social media to discuss a lot of stuff which I would never have discussed when I was young.

There is also the problem of cyber bullying and pornography – so there is a negative aspect to the technology as well as the many positive things it offers.

People have complained that young people today do not have much of an attention span. But when you see the complexity of the games they play on a computer, this is just not the case. Children's books, films and games all require the ability to pay attention over quite long periods of time.

Teachers complain that they have to entertain kids these days. Teachers are better now. I was bored at school. You can access and learn so much quicker now using the internet. My son can find out all he needs for his homework in about 5 minutes.

My worry is that young people are in a virtual world – relating to people all over the world – but not in touch with the local community.

I don't know my neighbours. I say hello but I don't know them and they don't want to know me. I know my immediate neighbours, but only those right next door. Not two or three doors down. Who do you go and borrow eggs and sugar from?

We haven't touched on the environment. It's getting worse. We're consuming more. I was amazed to discover that it takes the resources of 3 UKs to support the UK; only 1.8 USAs to support the USA but a staggering 18 Qatars to support Qatar. News does sometimes cover environmental issues.

You need to make more effort to understand complex issues.

I want someone to tell me what to do. I don't want choice. When I was a newly qualified solicitor I was surprised that people wanted me to tell them what to do.

There is a withdrawal from experts. The authorities are not always trusted. It's not necessary that people want to lose responsibility. What is expertise – something about experience?

### **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 two interrelated hypotheses followed from a lively and stimulating discussion.

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1:**

## **Analysis**

We are living in a rapidly changing world with global reach through the internet which means that we can follow in intimate detail something happening to people with whom we have no personal relationship. The attention of the media to any of the crises which are reported changes from day to day and week to week. So although we have some knowledge of what is going on, it is not easy to be sure that we have an up to date picture. Also we do not understand the historical, cultural and economic context in which these situations come to our attention. This leaves us partly knowing but largely in a state of unknowing. The established media is now in competition with the new social media which is able to report on the spot but without traditional reporters or any editorial process. This leaves the viewer uncertain about the reliability of the information being imparted. With no authoritative source to rely on, we are having to make judgements without being fully informed. So whether we are asked as individuals to donate money or as citizens to vote for sending in troops to assist those in need, we find it difficult to reach a consensus about what course of action is best. This means that we are reduced to individual responsibility with little opportunity of collective action for the common good.

### **Hypothesis 1:**

Because of massive changes and unpredictability there is a loss of trust in traditional authorities. Members of society are not able to come together for a common response to highly anxious and complex situations. So individuals are isolated in their bedrooms either searching for answers or distracting themselves with games.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2:**

#### **Analysis**

There seems to be a generational gap emerging as a result of the invention of the smart phone, tablet computers and social media. Older people are not as at home with the new technology, whereas even quite young children seem to have an innate knowledge about how to work it. Those in the room, who were all over the age of 30, were somewhat dubious about the effect of young people spending hours on their phones and computers and not being socialised in traditional ways. The fact that you can find a friend on the other side of the world, or even a marriage partner, simply by going online is a new phenomenon. Perhaps if we could make the world smaller and have clearer boundaries around ourselves, life would be simpler. The complexity of the world means that we sometimes feel invaded. In which case we may want to keep ourselves to ourselves more in order to keep away from too many demands on our attention which we cannot control. Is there a possibility that the under 30s are using the internet as a mean of setting new boundaries, where they choose their friends and their hobbies and occupations not in relation to their geographical location but by their own interests? In some ways the internet is allowing a global language to develop which cuts across the barriers of nationality and regional languages, allowing people to communicate through text talk and Twitter using a new set of signs and symbols. This may appear to older people as a dumbing down of good English and good grammar. But if it results in better communication across traditional boundaries, it can be seen in a positive light.

### **Hypothesis 2:**

The emergence of new technology and social media means that those under 30 (generation Y) are making sense of things in a different way. They are communicating with their peers, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, across the globe and across traditional boundaries. However, the result is that older people are excluded from this experience and there is a step change in the way the generations relate to each other.

**Convener Paul Regan**