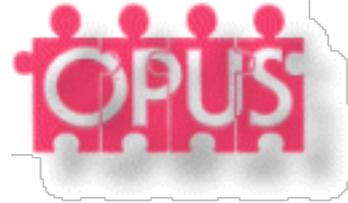


AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

**United Kingdom and the World at Autumn 2015
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on October 7th 2015**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

PART 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles; be they 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

PART 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES.

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

Members spoke of competition and how privatisation is grabbing and having to deal with the new monopolies that now prevent competition ... spending days trying to access the right people. 'Huge and fragmented = the modern private organisation'. Concerns were also expressed about the links between politicians/government and the press and the current attempt to privatise the BBC.

The cut to Highgate Health Centre budget of 50% was seen as 'changing the life of the community' and 'where do users now find something...?' Core values of the British system of health were felt to be undermined.

Attempts to pursue mindfulness and not get angry was accompanied by a 'but it makes me angry'... and 'but nothing you can do, you have to face the situation best you can'.

Feelings of panic among the young were expressed and a sense of no way to influence events. One member described not having access to social housing but not being wealthy enough to get a mortgage – the feeling was like being a 'lost citizen'. Talk of "optimistic solutions came from 'techy people' who replace things.

Uninformed prejudice and ignorance was felt to shape British public opinion. The question was posed whether the papers lead or follow this. There was a sense of panic an earlier experiences of immigration and integration were ignored. New students from overseas faced a media

on arrival which talked about how horrible immigrants are and a sense of the UK becoming "isolated". Domestic turmoil mirrored across the globe.

There was concern about Syria and the ease with which Russia has acted but others noted the USA done just as much off their own bat and likewise could also be extremely brutal too. There was a sense that things were hugely dangerous and 'we don't know whom to support' or who is a terrorist and 'who are the baddies and goodies' as someone noted recalling their grandchild's terms. There was felt to be something very primitive/infantile about this as though as a society we want to give ourselves assurances that we are the goodies. Also 'terrorists' it was noted can later be viewed differently/ be seen to do good things. There was an acute sense of powerlessness around British influence as we are now reliant on strategic alliances whereas ISIS has a clear mandate. At the moment we are on the losing end rather than the powerful role. There was a conflict between primitive and civilised behaviours and rules were ignored with impunity. But defacing of monuments and statues, it was pointed out was nothing new (eg Reformation) and a norm for new imperialisms. And we know why these psychotic frames of mind develop.

One member spoke of not feeling represented by current political leadership either by Corbyn or the Tories. Sense of uncertainty and fragility of bonds and relationships. One member holding on to retirement but at the same time concerned their GP might disappear and wanting to be reassured 'I'm here for the duration'. One person spoke of a rise of a counter cultures coming to the surface and Corbyn was seen both as an expression of this for some but not by others.

A fear of fragmentation/annihilation was felt to arise from not knowing how to proceed. For many there was a sense of helplessness and confusion and an inability to influence political choices and decisions.

PART 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the 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 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.

Analysis: A world divided between 'Goodies and Baddies'

There was strong need to identify baddies/ terrorists/ outsiders - and by

implication locate residual goodness. Yet one person's baddie could be viewed more positively by other members of the LP.

Jeremy Corbyn was seen as unelectable by some and the product of a classic basic assumption leadership situation i.e. who better than to elect than unelectable leader to solve impossible problems. But for others he was a refreshing voice opening up a very different political movement / conversation: shaking things up and surfacing a new counter culture of the politically alienated and reflective of the absence of leadership potential in colleagues.

Russian interests and Putin were keenly feared by some members of the LP particularly arising from their newly heightened involvement in Syria. It was seen by some as a sign that western democracies are disadvantaged by their democratic process in their slowness to intervene militarily in the civil war in Syria. But other members also saw America as an active agent with Putin as much a bogeyman with whom it is possible to negotiate.

The demonisation of ISIS brutality was a focus of great concern generally and interesting parallels were drawn with the puritan movements which likewise led to the defacing of statues in 17th century Britain – and typical of what happens when a new regime takes hold. Their brutality was seen by some members as needing to be understood alongside the brutality and miscalculations of America and Britain: assassination by drone warfare; decisions during and following the Iraq war.

The Israeli occupation of Palestine was seen once again to be producing turmoil and unchecked. One member pondered the fact that Muslims in the UK had tended to keep their heads below the parapet in speaking out against ISIS in the past and this had been perceived as having had hidden sympathies rather than a reaction to being badly treated by the media? It was felt to be a reminder to perceive people as individual persons not stereotypes – just as a teacher has to do in a class of thirty children.

It was emphasised that we know why the Syria war has happened and parallels were drawn with the way Hitler came to power on the back of the support of the people but then ultimately nobody could stop him. It meant not turning a blind eye to addressing underlying reasons.

Members expressed very different views about the politics of austerity and the need for deficit reduction –widely supported by City and media economists albeit modified behind the scenes. It was also pointed out by one member that academic economists mostly see austerity economics as primarily a political smokescreen for the delivery of a smaller welfare state and that the housing bubble would likewise soon burst and with it the economy was likewise set for renewed crisis.

Analysis 2: Fragmentation, powerlessness, panic.

There were many references to fragmentation, feelings of powerlessness, and a sense of helplessness and anger but with little expression of active engagement in influencing political decisions which connect global changes to our everyday lives. The story told by one member about major cuts to a Highgate day centre for people with mental health problems, stirred up a manifest sense of shock and anger as to the rationale for such cuts. Taken for granted social provision like day centres, social care, libraries etc are beginning to disappear with austerity politics now also impinging on a middle class way of life and 'British values'. There were references to a sense of panic. Life options were reducing such as around access to housing for younger people with one younger member describing how she felt like a lost citizen. For some older members working in health and welfare there was a sense of holding on until retirement and of psychic retreats. And more generally, the spectre of the potential automation of many jobs now lurks.

Analysis 3: A sense of loss

There was repeated reference during the discussion to the impact of the end of the British Empire and to the consequent loss of status, respect and power, and of it being pay back time – a recent reminder being calls for reparation for the costs of slavery in Jamaica. A member then pointed out that the end of the British Empire has been a 50-year process already. So its continuing presence underlined just how running an empire lingers on and remains a powerful force in our imagination and that its loss has still not been fully worked through in understanding our limits. One member used the expression 'imperial decompression': ie just how does no longer being top dog play out psychologically in our daily lives in the way captured by this phrase?

Hypotheses

Towards the conclusion of the LP, one member commented that it had been incredibly difficult to think and to hold onto any one thought in the LP. This reflected the turbulence of ideas indicated in these key themes emerging. So many thoughts were emerging it was difficult to process them. There was a tangible sense of being overwhelmed by the many anxieties aroused by the multiple socio economic and political changes now impinging on us locally and globally. There was also sharply contested understanding of many of the events being raised. It was difficult for a common understanding to emerge as the basis for developing shared hypotheses.

The discussion was fragmented around multiple issues and contradictory viewpoints and didn't lend itself to developing shared hypotheses. Other key themes perhaps needed to be identified to be

able to see more clearly what was going on below the surface linking the different observations. Two tentative hypotheses were put forward but it was generally agreed that they required more development.

Hypothesis 1

The turbulence of events at home and abroad make us the recipients of hate and anger. As a consequence we experience guilt and shame. We then project the latter onto others, which then allows us to indulge ourselves with good feelings of compassion. These emotions of shame and guilt help us to repair relationships and initiate diplomatic action but as we own them our opponent likewise disowns them.

Hypothesis 2

The fragmentation of society means that we experience uncertainty. Uncertainty makes it difficult to reflect and find meaning so we feel drawn to psychic retreats and forms of avoidance. Uncertainty also results in primitive reactions of panic and is heightened by the presence of extreme voices and impulsive behaviour encouraged via the Internet. Because of this we cannot tell good from bad and make sense of our environment. Disengagement means that even our primitive defences are no longer a safe harbour and as a consequence we try to surf the surface of events and for example (for some) choose a leader who provides no certainty.

Convenor: Ursula Murray