



## 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.

Concerns and preoccupations ranged from the introduction of a tax per bag for the collection of rubbish, to legal disputes about land usage within villages and towns to broad issues concerning the role of venture capital in bringing opportunities and costs to various parts of the country. This seems to encompass a panorama of preoccupations from the daily concerns of individuals and families to broader issues affecting communes and even the relationship between Switzerland and the international business community.

On January 1st, a number of cantons introduced a system of pay per bag for the disposal of rubbish. The cost per bag was seen by some to be rather high and by others as a necessity to encourage citizens to take responsibility for the disposal of the rubbish they create. The division of opinions represents the way Swiss society is dealing with this issue, holding the tension between those who want to take action to take care of the environment and those who feel it is not their responsibility to concern themselves about waste disposal. This was seen as a metaphor for attitudes about society in general – a split between those who want the goods (or the good life that is, in general, available in Switzerland) but do not want to concern themselves with the concerns, logistics or responsibilities of having the goods and those who believe that there are responsibilities as well as rights.

A number of concerns were also discussed at a communal level. The introduction of lengthened school days irritated many parents as the days are felt to be excessively long for the children. Parents were also angered as despite their lobbies against the changes, they felt unheard and powerless vis-à-vis the authorities. There was disagreement and discontent about the arguments for the introduction of longer days. The schools and communes wanted to save costs on transport and the parents wanted to consider the needs of the children, representing a split of interests.

A lively discussion also took place about the role of foreign companies opening sites in Switzerland due to tax incentives and then leaving if conditions change. There were some who felt this brought innovation, job creation and new opportunities to the country and others who saw the short-term perspective of foreign companies as opportunistic with no concern for the infrastructure of the country or for the longer-term duty of care for the people who worked in these ventures.

Switzerland continues to enjoy a more robust economic situation than neighbouring countries and gratitude was expressed for this good fortune. However, many voiced concerns about a greater instability in the job market with especial concern about the number of people entering the country to seek work. There is also a sense of divide between the so-called 'fat cats' – executives who earn excessive salaries and the increase in the number of people on the poverty line in Switzerland.

## Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represents some of these themes.

A struggle between the self and society seemed to emerge as a common theme in the discussions. How to manage the desire to look after oneself and yet also to contribute as a responsible citizen? The fact that both issues were held in mind (at least some of the time) was felt to be more hopeful than last year when the sense was much more hopeless.

### ***Protective Individualism***

A concern for “stuff close to the bone” emerged. How to protect oneself, one’s family, friends and network? On a micro level people felt sympathetic to this rather natural human tendency. Of course they wanted their friends and families to be employed and in good situations yet on a broader level there was outrage at the damage that can be done by such protectionism. Anger was expressed at recent damaging stories about Swiss banking, which illustrate the problems associated with closed self-protectionist clubs fuelled by greed and self-interest. Trying to bridge the tension of recognising the greed within oneself and not only projecting it outward was felt to be exhausting. Sometimes it was felt to be easier to shut off from the tension and to believe it all happens ‘out there’, and to feel smug about our own actions – yet the tension remains as most of us have self-protectionist tendencies and are acutely aware of these.

### ***Role Models – Where have they Gone?***

A general weariness was voiced at the greed and selfishness of people who might previously have been looked to as role models, such as executives (especially those in the banking industry) and international celebrities. A sense in the group was that it is up to us to take our place in society, to make changes, no matter how small, as the role models were seen to be lacking in moral fibre and were not trusted to set decent examples based on honest values. If banks are being robbed from the inside and school structures organised based on saving money, there was a sense that “if not us, who will take up the challenges?”

### ***Independence As A Way to Avoid Assuming Power***

The number of people employed full time in regular employment seems to be changing. Was that a peculiarity of this group? The group comprised retired people, those setting up small entrepreneurial concerns, those recently made redundant by bigger organisations and independent consultants as well as a smaller number of people working for organisations. Independence was discussed both as a chosen way of life but also perhaps a way to mask the avoidance of taking up power and authority in organisations or society, in which care and power need to be held and exercised simultaneously. Related to this is the theme of volunteering – which was seen both as a way of helping to make change happen and also of avoiding taking more full-time, committed authority.

### ***Shifting Alliances***

Living in this complex world filled with ‘input’ from multi-media, the Web as well as people from many different walks of life was said to be challenging. How to differentiate between which inputs to pay attention to? And how to keep up with them all? There was a sense of being ‘got-at’ by technology and with so many electronic forms of contact – email, phone, sms, twitter etc., face-to-face contact was said to suffer due to the endless stream of electronic interruptions. It also led to a sense of shifting alliances as people associated different parts of their identity in different communities, some face-to-face e.g. neighbours, parents, friends and some more distant e.g. colleagues and even family. The geographic spread of families and yet the ability to remain connected through instant access technology presented a conundrum with which many people struggled as it brought up feelings of guilt if contact was not maintained when it could be through technology and loneliness when the ability to work in another country led to separation. The joy of connecting electronically was acknowledged, but the greater impression was one of being overwhelmed by the technology.

## Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

The following three hypotheses are offered drawing on the preoccupations and themes outlined above.

The first is the most optimistic as it is seen to join the individual and society. It is based on the recognition that people are both part of the problems and solutions in society, thus it emerges from an integrative stance.

### Hypothesis 1

#### *Bridging the Gap – Scary But Possible*

Because people shared pre-occupations ranging from the micro concerns of daily life to broader communal issues and even considerations about the impact of international business matters, it was felt that they formed a bridge encompassing the different levels and concerns of society. Thus whilst people voiced their individual selfish needs and desires, there seemed to be a broader understanding that all needed to contribute to make society work. An image of an ice bridge was made – a bridge that could be strong, solid and natural and yet that could suffer fissures and breaks if too much strain was put on it or if the external conditions changed too rapidly. Unlike the depressed state of people in the 2012 Listening Post, there seemed to be a more mature sense of hopeful concern in this hypothesis.

Perhaps in response to the anxiety that is provoked by the need to take a more responsible position and to co-operate with people from different perspectives in the interests of society, hypothesis two is a reaction to that, building on the theme of self-protection.

### Hypothesis 2

#### *On ne fait pas grand choses*

Because the world seems scary, overwhelming and complex people retreat into safe havens of familiarity to escape the constant stream of bad news and to recharge. “On ne fait pas grand choses” is an expression on the lips of many to express a sense of hunkering down, of reigning in expectations and getting back to basics – good health, family, a sense of stability that can come from every day living if one is reasonable as a reaction to the lack of stability in evidence in the external world.

In difficult times it is easy to take polarised positions for example being active or passive, which can be exemplified in the above hypotheses. Hypothesis three perhaps offers a *raison d’être* for action, of gaining courage to act through shared action, shared responsibility.

### Hypothesis 3

#### *Together We Stand, Divided We Fall*

Because people feel powerless against and untrusting of authorities, they join together to take action on a specific task. This enables them to feel courageous, useful and more potent and guards against a sense of lethargy. However, it can also create further splits in society, if it creates greater feelings of ‘us and them’ as expressed in “together we stand, divided we fall”.

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