

"Britain and the World at the Dawn of 2003"

Report of a New Year's Listening Post
held on Wednesday 8th January
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm
College Hall, University of London,
Malet Street, 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 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. On this occasion, themes were difficult to name but can be drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

(a) The world is currently experienced as highly complicated and complex, it seems clear that we are moving (have moved) from a reasonably predictable environment to a situation where we just cannot begin to make sense of what is happening. It really is experienced as a paradigm change. Of the factors that can be identified as contributing to this situation it seems that the tension between global and national economies and politics is highly significant. It is the view that a global economy results in serious weakening of the national (known) system.

(b) There were frequent references to death and to insecurity. It seems likely that this is a resultant effect of the theme developed above. The world was viewed as a frightening place both locally and globally. And the death 'of a way of life' was seen to pose a great challenge. There is a struggle around the very concept of democracy. The problem faced was how we defend against a fear of death in all its manifestations. It seemed that at the personal and social levels we were being overwhelmed by the complexity, and were feeling quite helpless and retreating from the problem. We didn't even seem to have the language to discuss some of the issues faced by society. As one person put it, 'Its like a search for the Holy Grail'.

(c) There was also a feeling that we were living through an illusion or that we were being manipulated or 'conned' or facing some sort of dishonesty. Allied to this theme, there were allusions to fairy stories and a view that the media were adopting a role as the spokespeople for the societal unconscious.

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. Again, there was a lack of clear, easily identifiable issues but there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: It was the view that society being faced with an array of complicated, new and diverse issues (at a global and local level) we are left with a strong experience and feeling of not knowing, of not having the knowledge to meet the challenges. This raises the problem of how we can live without knowing? Truth is, that we really don't know what to do. This leads to us not trusting and being fearful and this is expressed, on the one hand, as rage (fight) and on the other hand, as helplessness (flight).

Hypothesis: The complicated and changing dynamics arising from the tension between global and national economies and politics is such that members of society are left with an inability and inadequacy of knowledge to meet the challenges presented. They react, on the one hand, with rage (fight) and on the other hand, with helplessness (flight).

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The members reflected on the election of New Labour and likened it to an idealised marriage (between govt and citizens) where we would all live happily ever after without any consideration of the realities of marriage. It was felt that the expectancy was not real but was based on phantasy. It was a state of hope based on fantastical notions that we projected into the incoming Government, in general, and into Tony Blair, in particular. We were well aware that we had previously created a bad object, which had resulted in negative and hostile projections being laid at the door of anything behind the Iron Curtain. And were aware of the demonising effects that these projections had on those concerned. Having been placed in a situation where we have had to take back our projections, it seems that we seek to locate them elsewhere, for example, in Saddam Hussein. We now came to realise that this extreme and exaggerated idealisation of Tony Blair had created a good object which was equally dangerous. We have projected into Tony Blair all our fantasies about our hopes of a perfect world and beliefs that everything is possible and inevitably to be achieved; and this has helped to create an omnipotent being. It is hard to acknowledge our part in this dynamic as the origins lie in our very hopes and dreams. We also experience guilt and find it hard to accept our part in creating this omnipotent being, a quality we complain about. We asked, 'what have we done?', 'what is our responsibility?' There was now a realisation

that a marriage is the beginning and not an end in itself. We need to take back our idealised projections. Or, as one member said, 'we need a divorce'.

Hypothesis: The current Government was elected at a time of great hope and with many fantasising that their dreams had become true. The result was a continuous and powerful stream of positive projections into what was seen as an idealised good object. These projections predominantly based on omnipotent thinking and seldom on reality had the effect of helping to create a Prime Minister who acted as if he were omnipotent. Initially, we attack this omnipotent being but realising, grudgingly, our part in this process we are able to take back our projections and begin to work with reality.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Part of the work in this part concerned a struggle to be hopeful. It was considered that hope resides in individuals, in what we referred to as, 'The power of ONE'. It was also clear that the process of the Listening Post had started to clarify issues and to enable members to begin to think about how they might use the power of one. It was realised that change meant giving up some previously strongly held values and beliefs, the question raised was whether we were willing to give up what we have. There was an acknowledgement that the old has died and that there was an inevitability about the possibility of social change at the national level. As one member said, 'we can't continue to have what we had before'. An example was the welfare state which took care of people but also created dependency. It was also realised that there was currently a major reorganisation of capitalism occurring and that there will be a restructuring, even though the results are not obvious at this time. The question was also asked, 'Do we not know?' Yes, there is, of course, a fear of what's round the corner, but there was also a strong feeling that we might in fact know but that we don't want to know; we can't face the future. Members drew hope from analysing the dynamics. The realisation of death was felt to bring with it a responsibility for knowing. The realisation that we are vulnerable, that no one will help us, reminded us that we need to take responsibility for knowing more.

Hypothesis: Albeit, that the quality of change at this time makes it exceptionally difficult to understand, part of 'not knowing' is a result of denial that things are changing and that they have to change. Faced with the realisation that death (of a way of life) is inevitable, this brings with it a responsibility for knowing. A movement away from denial to facing up to reality. In doing so, it enables us to hold on to the notion of hope.

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