

**"Britain and the World
at the Dawn of 2004"**
Report of a Listening Post held on
Wednesday 14th January 2004
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 can be drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

(a) *Lack of Trust.*

The experience in many areas of society, in particular: government, law, church, medical profession, and public sector service institutions, was such that there was a severe loss of trust in many if not most of the traditional forms of authority. In many instances it was considered that there was an abuse of power by those concerned. In other instances, authority was experienced as ambiguous and emotions ranged from trust to mistrust.

(b) *A Chaotic or Unintegrated Society.*

Doubtless connected to the current lack of trust many institutions were experienced as contributing to a chaotic and unintegrated environment rather than providing the containment that was required and which various institutions had traditionally provided. It was felt that society was in a state of fragmentation and disorientation, it seemed a chaotic society. It was a Tower of Babel sort of chaos where it was near impossible to communicate with others.

(c) *Fear.*

At this time it was felt that there was an escalation of fear in society. It was not experienced as a safe place. Some of this fear arose out of the constant publicity about terrorism. But there was something more deep seated than this. It was felt that there was an underlying fear regarding the state of society itself. Some of this was connected to trust as it was felt that we were constantly being provided with 'good messages' (spin) which was eventually seen as controlling and had an impact on our fears of freedom. In addition, the impact of dramatic changes resulting from globalisation increased fear. And, politically driven changes nationally, especially the tendency to centralise and

measure, had an effect of removing individual responsibility, with a resulting feeling of a loss of control.

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: The analysis commenced with several inputs regarding fear. A recognition and attempt at understanding that Osama Bin Laden really did feel 'anti' the USA; and the saying 'we have nothing to fear but fear itself'. From this, it was suggested that society was not providing adequate containment. The members then quickly moved to a suggested hypothesis which was developed as below.

Hypothesis: Escalation of Fear. Substantial change has taken place in many of our institutions, largely as a result of globalisation. This has resulted in 'new' versions of important institutions which now seem unable to provide the containing function which was previously so important. Because this containing function of institutions in our society do not function as needed, our internal anxieties cannot be contained and we perceive external threats as uncontrollable. A result is an escalation of fear in society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Deriving from, and developing on, the position of the previous hypothesis the members then worked at an analysis of the way that the failure of our wish to be contained was leading to centralised control over our lives. It was felt that a mistaken understanding of societal demands and projections on our institutions were such that they were contributing to those institutions moving from decentralised to centralised control. And, most importantly, from individual and collective responsibility to imposed control over many facets of our lives. The members' view was that fundamentalism, evangelical approaches, the imposition of speed cameras, sky marshals, etc., leads to a spurious certainty. Whereas, the reality for the members was that it simply leads to a greater sense of fear. It was suggested that when there was self-management there was self-containment. Centralised control simply escalates the fear factor in society.

Hypothesis: Misunderstood Response to Societal Fear. Because members of society do not have their desires for containment met by those institutions that they have grown to rely upon, they make demands of, and put projections into those concerned with

running institutions, seeking them to provide more security. However, the responses are frequently not experienced as helpful or providing containment but, on the contrary, providing some form of spurious certainty which simply adds to the escalation of fear.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: : Again, building on the previous hypotheses, the analysis moved to a consideration of our own role in a world where we did not trust others. A world where we 'blamed' institutions (in the mind) but realised that those institutions were nothing without the people who worked there. And that it was those people who were responsible and needed to be held accountable for the results of their actions. From our perspective it was also realised that it was easy to sit back and 'blame'. This only led to a sort of false independence. It was felt that one of the reasons for this was the Welfare State which had contributed to such an approach being taken. This also led to a position where people took an 'I'm all right Jack' attitude, but it was accepted that this didn't get us anywhere. The view was also expressed that the more self-managing we were, the less containment we needed. However, while independence was important there was an important shift to a realisation that members of society have lost sight of the good aspect of interdependence. One's sense of self depends on validation of others. We cannot exist solely as independent beings, reality testing does not occur in the private world of the self. Reality testing - the need for continuity, consistency and confirmation - leads to consensual validation. In this sense we can only be dependent if we are interdependent. Nevertheless, such are the current dynamics that fear of annihilation, fear for our individual futures, false hope ('we can do anything with technology' - Tony Benn), constant change, and overwork, leads to a lack of mutual appreciation. Add to this the changing nature of so many aspects of society, not least traditional political alliances, and it becomes increasingly difficult to find others who will validate personal views. A result is a breakdown of our individual defences. Our 'good enough' defences are now no longer adequate, there is therefore more stimulation of internal anxiety which then gets acted out. Society is experienced as an unintegrated environment.

Hypothesis: An Unintegrated Environment. The massive and constant change that has and is taking place in society over recent times, has aroused fears of personal safety and even annihilation in individual members of society. Because of this, they have been increasingly driven towards taking an independent approach. However, our sense of self depends on validation of others and we cannot exist solely as independent beings, we can only be dependent if we are interdependent. A result is a breakdown of internal defences and increased internal anxiety which is acted out, with a result that society is experienced as a unintegrated environment.

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