

**"Holland and the World
at the Dawn of 2005"
Report of a Listening Post
held in January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

During this part of the Listening Post, the participants were invited to share the experiences they had in their various social roles: as an employee or as an employer, as a pensioner or as a member of a political or religious organisation, as a neighbour or as a volunteer, as a member of a family or a community. This part mainly concentrates on "the events in everyday life", which are related to the social or external world of a participant.

The Netherlands set up a record in the field of private gifts for good causes. Various actions were launched following the disaster in Asia, India, Sri Lanka and Africa. Millions of viewers watched a TV broadcast on 6 January and halfway through the night everyone cheered at the announcement that never before Dutch civilian people and Dutch industry had raised so much money. Listening Post participants obviously put this event forward, though it did not dominate the meeting. There was ample space for other experiences as well, which are briefly summarized in the second part [part 2.] of this report.

This time it was striking that the meeting often tended to turn into a debate. A relatively small amount of experiences and corresponding meanings were named. One meaning of a personal experience was quickly countered by an opposite meaning. On occasion this report will refer to them.

Part 2. DETERMINATION OF THE MAIN THEMES

The objective of the second part was to name and define the main themes arising from part 1. The participants did not have any difficulty in naming quite a number of themes, although there was some overlapping. Summing up:

1. Impotence and confusion was the first theme to be mentioned. In the past you felt that "you were going somewhere": for instance to a better world both materially and non-materially. Impotence has replaced the sense of being able to make a contribution. The world has become too complex to have a clear view of it for adequate actions. The many opinions of what is going on add to this confusion. One solution seems to be to break off contact with other people.

The fleetingness of life, having a lot on your mind, having many responsibilities, without time for reflection on your experiences and what they mean to you. There is a lot of pressure on people to have an opinion. Some feel comfortable at the thought that they can do without an opinion just now; simply because they do

not have one. Others put in a lot of effort to transfer the uncertainty of not knowing at the beginning of the day, into an opinion towards the end of the day.

2. People feel that the media largely influence what is important and what is not. Society is "event-driven": the murder of Fortuin, the death of the popular singer André Hazes, the wrong substitution by national coach Dick Advocaat during the European Cup soccer match, the death of Theo van Gogh and the latest media hype: the Tsunami. The media seem to direct people's emotion regarding these events. The Dutch nation allows itself to be directed and wanders from one emotional outburst to the next. Time and time again the murders, the dead and/or the emotions of people are displayed. To the media suffering is a product and they tumble over one another to show it to the audience. It is difficult to cut yourself off. Where is the remote control of this image machine? If you cut yourself off you are accused of emotional poverty. We have created a world in which we threaten to become lookers-on. Pictures of suffering and emotions are consumer articles; to some they are a contribution to the quality of the awareness that incredible things are happening in the world. It even holds some attraction.
3. It seems that authority has served its turn in the Netherlands. It is gradually becoming more difficult to fill public positions. These officials are constantly exposed to criticism and are called to account in an inflammatory and disrespectful manner. The words 'character assassination' are used in this context. The frame of mind of the Dutch people is described in words, such as regression, boundlessness and addiction. Politicians receiving death threats is of the order of the day. We have to wonder if there is anyone left who is prepared to be responsible for and within this society. Politicians go to any length to try and keep the civilians satisfied and to make them believe that they are heard and that their needs are taken care of. Even politicians bounce along with the hype of the day; short-term policy prevails.
4. The future is discussed by means of children's upbringing. Do the children give us hope for a better world? Opinions differ on this. On the one hand children seem to be less socially committed; is it a lack of focus, hope and ambition? They are more interested in TV and the computer. It has turned their reality into a virtual one. Mutual contacts are superficial. It is a matter of pseudo intimacy without any real meaning.

Perhaps the children are the outstanding example of people becoming skilled in dealing with large amounts of information? Are they indeed capable (through the computer) of having meaningful contact with others? Do they make sensible choices while modelling their own lives and, consequently, social life?

5. The connection with fellow civilians is another theme. Society is becoming more and more disintegrated. There are few common and appealing goals available to hold Dutch society together. The issue of the Dutch identity is relevant to one person, whereas someone else feels that it is a characteristic of Dutch society. Divorces among parents create problematic contacts between children and parents. Life in neighbourhoods and districts is characterized by passive behaviour and lack of initiative.

Part 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS

In this part of the Listening Post, based on parts 1 and 2, the participants collectively try and name the currently underlying conscious or subconscious dynamics of what goes on in the world and to come to hypotheses in relation to what is happening right now. The participants are now more involved in what you could call 'the internal world'. On the one hand their collective ideas and thoughts determine how they experience the external reality and on the other hand they determine their actions towards that external world.

The author had a hard time formulating clear and unambiguous hypotheses for this report from the above observations. An effort has been made below to discuss the themes on a slightly higher abstract level, which has resulted in the following hypotheses:

Analysis and hypothesis 1

Analysis: During this Listening Post it was remarkable that whenever someone voiced his or her concern about something or other, he or she was soon offered examples that had to show that these worries were unfounded. This occurred with subjects, such as the media, children's attitudes, the complexity of the world, and the like. When at one point someone called that it was not all that bad and illustrated this statement with examples, he was even applauded. It was also striking that the theme of 'terrorism' and 'fundamentalism' was not mentioned a single time. Less than two months ago, up till Christmas, the Netherlands was in great turmoil over the murder of Theo van Gogh. The Tsunami was regarded as a 'blessing in disguise'. Dutch society showed it's good side. It showed that it could also bring forth something positive as a collective. The direct or indirect issue was if there was or wasn't hope for Dutch society? Could we and did we dare to discern this? Yet also: who was responsible?

The economic recession and the government policy to cut down on the social welfare state have increased the fear for losing acquired rights. The inequality in the world and the participation in international collaborations see to it that problems cannot be kept outside the nation's borders. (Europe, Iraq, Immigrants) The government is accused of not providing sufficient safeguards to make sure that life can be continued the way it is.

Hypothesis: The social and economic changes in the world which are experienced to be dramatic and the question about one's personal contribution to this situation, does not make it easy for people to observe and understand the world. They search for and distrust new frameworks of interpretation. Seeking out the space where both the positive and the negative sides of society are investigated, is like walking along the edge of an abyss. Discussions threaten to increase the distance between one another. People quickly want out of this confusing and sometimes painful situation, yet they lack the means. Learning to deal with 'not knowing the answer' could prove fruitful in the long term. A dialogue between (religious) groups in society could help. At least this attitude would give the media less opportunity to do its entertaining and directing work.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The participants paid ample attention to the forming and propagation of opinions. They do not entirely agree on the possibilities for a person to make his voice heard. They are pleased that the emancipation has made the voice of many people, a broad audience, heard. At the same time they wonder if the social debate does not suffer from shallowness. The fact that everyone is allowed to make an uncontrolled contribution, based on the freedom of speech, to the public debate, leads to aimless rhetoric and/or a vulgar flood of abuse. The intellectual elite does not dare to speak up anymore and lingers on society's sidelines. Some doubt that every vote counts, others fight for it. People themselves indicate that at times they do not know what to think and say. Most people regard personal reflection, gaining more in-depth knowledge, and paying attention to one's own opinion as vital.

Hypothesis: The freedom of speech makes everyone's voice heard which is important within a democratic society. However, freedom of speech has changed into a licence to say anything you think and is therefore on the way of confining itself. Personal limitation, deepening one's understanding of oneself and the acknowledgement of someone else's quality and making use of meaningful sources, seem to be essential, however, for having peace and quiet return to the public debate.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3.

Analysis: The world economy is changing drastically. Labour is leaving the Netherlands for India and China. People from the new European member states take over jobs from the Dutch. Having a job is once again less taken for granted. The Netherlands has appeased its conscience or new generations must wake up. The fact that the Netherlands has been a tolerant model country is part of the story that we saw to it that we could feel great despite our smallness. The economic role has now been submitted to pressure as well. The question is how to look at this phenomenon. If we have to do with less in Europe and in the Netherlands, will this automatically mean that we will be worse off?

Hypothesis: When economic thinking will have less influence, there will be room for finding lost values again and for sharing wealth and achievements with others. Too great a focus on one's own advantage, one's own survival and the problems in one's own country create fear and a less open attitude towards (groupings) in other countries. Historical knowledge can make people aware of the waves of events which generations had to undergo and can put everyday life into perspective.

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