

**"Sweden and the World  
at the Dawn of 2005"  
Report of a Listening Post  
held on Monday 17th January**



**Encouraging The Reflective Citizen**

**Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

In this part of the Listening post the participants were invited to identify, contribute and explore their experiences in various social roles. The fourteen participants came from different sectors in society. The participants were in the same age, around 50 years and more. Age was also a central theme in what was discussed. The tsunami in South East Asia was present during the entire session, which could be seen in what was said as well as in an, at times, intense emotional tone. The opening was a discussion about the meaning of that the generation born in the forties soon will retire. This was explored in a personal and a societal perspective.

Another theme was the experience of a growing arrogance shown by those in power and the relation between power and powerlessness. The future was explored in questions about the ability to hand over and let go in a decent way and in stories about grand children. The meaning of the new male role, i.e. that fathers are closer to their children was seen as a hope for the future. However, there is also reason to worry about the future considering that fewer children are being born and that people postpone having children closer to their forties.

The personal reaction to the tsunami was both an experience of new hopes, a sharpened view and feelings of vitality and an experience of reactions obscuring your view, hence making it difficult to differentiate what is important. Worries about disbandment of standards and problems with accountability were contradicted to a wish to contribute and take responsibility. This was related to a fear for power as well as powerlessness and our being unwilling to take power.

**Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

The aim in Part 2 was to collectively identify major themes. Three major themes were identified:

- Age and shift of generations
- Power and powerlessness
- Gender and the new male role

**Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION1.**

***1. Age and shift of generations***

What is the meaning with old people? This slightly provocative question summarize the analysis of the transition that many of the participant found themselves in both on a personal level and in relation to the necessary transformation of the welfare state. A

large group born in the forties will retire and the question of what they leave behind was asked. Was life better in earlier times? Young people of today are more intelligent than former generations and are more able to use the experience of the older generation. At the same time the freedom of choice has originated a form of questioning and a mentality based on the idea that anything goes. The relation between morality and the individual/collective was seen in a generational perspective and the disbandment of standards and values was seen as a big problem. This has led to a difficulty of transferring knowledge and experience between generations. The inclination of the generation born in the forties of just talking about themselves was mentioned as well as enacted in the session. It emerged in two ways: as an expansive self-consciousness where age was denied and in the question of how to leave in a decent and unnoticed way. To distance oneself and refuse to be categorised was another way of dealing with the theme of generation.

**Hypothesis:** The transformation of the welfare state was related to the generation that is approaching retirement and the structure of society as well as structure of population might influence the personal wellbeing directly. Personal wellbeing will in this way be tied to the inheritance and the responsibility for what kind of society this generation has created. It has become more and more difficult to deny the problem of providing for this demanding generation in the Swedish society. Some hope was found in the younger generations striving to bridge the boundaries of generations.

## **2. Power and powerlessness**

The tsunami has forced people to think in new ways. The conceptions of home and far away changed with the large number of Swedes that became victims of the disaster. The striving of bridging distances was stimulated and the participants had found a new hope and trust in peoples ability and willingness to help and participate. This existential experience was confronted by the way the Swedish government handled the disaster. Here, a growing arrogance was identified and the inclination to disconnect responsibility and increasing power was noticed. This was seen as a potential breeding place for fascism. The citizens' demand of being cared for and the rage when society proved unable to do so was explored in this connection. Here the fear of power and to have power was identified. The distribution of power in the Swedish society became visible in the traces of the tsunami. The concentration of power to the government contributed to that nobody dared to do something. However, there was a lot of civil activity that appeared as a contrast to this. People's ability to endure was symbolised by those Swedish people in southern Sweden, who after the storm had to live without electricity for weeks. Their modesty and positive spirit appeared as a new way of dealing with the unpredictable. Another power, media, was also explored. The picture of the disaster as well as the way to approach the victims became generalised and standardised. This had a negative influence of people's genuine feelings and involvement. Here two ways of personal relations to the disaster was explored. It gave a renewed sense of hope and vitality by the discovery of people's willingness to help. It also obscured the perspective on the urgent structural problems that was surfacing in the Swedish society before the disaster.

**Hypothesis:** Even before the tsunami, Swedish citizens were beginning to notice that the institutions on the Swedish society no longer had the stability that they expected. The disconnection between power and responsibility that had emerged in many ways earlier was now profound and concrete. The denial of human vulnerability both in relation to the forces of nature and to human destructiveness might have contributed to this. Behind this it is not possible to demand that society meet the dependency of its

citizens and there are questions about social contracts and if they can be restored and if the link between power and responsibility can be strengthened enough to protect democracy.

### **3. *The new male role***

Disasters created by humans were linked to male violence. Great expectations were put on the new male role and that fathers of today have such close contact with their children. There were strong beliefs that this would diminish men's' potential for violence. However, a new male role brings a new female role. Stories of men's and women's different reactions during the tsunami were told. It seemed that men had become busy with finding rescue and directed their attention outward and helping others while women turned their attention to the children and keeping the family together. Equality was described as phenomena of the welfare state and in a crisis people tend to return to traditional patterns. The question if there could be a connection between the disbandment of standards and the new male role was explored. At the same time, it was established that all institutions involved in the tsunami were headed by women: the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of defence, the minister of aid, the manager of Swedish Rescue Service Agency and the manager for the Swedish Emergency Management Agency. The media's "chatting" about the victims of the tsunami was characterised as a modern form of weepers. The genuine empathy was destroyed by the process in media and weepers were seen as a form of female violence. Generally, both the male and female perspective on the world has become superficial, which is symbolised by docu-soap operas and the place they have in media.

***Hypothesis:*** Equality between men and women has changed the balance within the family. The family's dependency on society might have contributed to a passivity that suppresses the debate in society. In questions of equality the demand on being political correct is profound. A critical review of the new male role and its relation to authority and preservation of standards is difficult but not entirely impossible. Male strength can also be a positive force. A critical review of women in power seems equally difficult to do. The tendency to demonise male violence and idealise female violence allow both men and women to decline responsibility and transform important issues about the relation between the sexes to entertainment.

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