

**"Portugal and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 10th January**



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. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that related 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. The participants were invited to select, in groups of two, the major themes which emerged in part one. This was not an easy task and many of the themes brought by the group overlapped. They can be described as follows:

- a) Exclusion/inclusion and its relation with success*
- b) The impact of communication and information in decisions and their outcome*
- c) The need for society to manage potentially disruptive questions*
- d) The role of school in integrating difference*

- e) The abortion referendum*
- f) The non-spoken issues*
- g) Democratic representation*
- h) The constant time pressure felt nowadays*

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. The group developed the following two hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

In the Listening Post, the first theme to appear was the question of exclusion/inclusion. A big part of the population is systematically excluded due to their lack of success, their behaviour or because they simply are hard to manage in social contexts. The importance of success in Portuguese contemporary society was even called by one of the participants as the "Religion of success". There is a huge difficulty in integrating difference. In this respect, "The School" appears as the institution with added responsibility. Nonetheless we have mixed feelings towards "The School". On the one hand, we feel the need for "The School" to accomplish an integrative role and to support children and adolescents with emotional, behavioural difficulties or from excluded backgrounds. On the other hand, we feel the need to protect our own children from others felt as disruptive and unintegrated. One of the participants described how in his role he pressures schools to accept difficult children, but how he was not certain if he would want his own children to have such difficult school colleagues.

But exclusion is not the only place where difference is seen. It seems that nowadays Portuguese common identity is not shared as before. There is the feeling that the Portuguese society is much more split and divided. Recent questions, such as the abortion referendum are on everyones mind, dividing the Portuguese society. The question "to what group do we belong" was raised when a participant presented himself as against abortion while trying to introduce the subject. The appearance of disruptive questions is more striking than some years ago. It was even commented that the role of the media as a uniformity force is not much efficient in creating a strong Portuguese identity, commonly shared.

Hypothesis:

In Portuguese contemporary society there is a lack of shared values as existed some years ago. The loss of this commonly shared "national identity" leads to the appearance of disruptive questions, which was not the case several years ago. The identification mechanisms used in the past, which gave us an inner sense of national cohesion, are not present nowadays. The feeling that we all share common characteristics is not as strong as before. Even though there is still the use of social institutions, these do not supply the same strong identity as before. As such, the appearance of disruptive questions, which split society, is facilitated.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

Our security nowadays faces threats that come from what used to be remote places. One of the participants referred that, the report of a casualty in a city 400 miles away from where he lives threatens his sense of security. Some years ago, the same situation would only have an impact in the city where it happened. It seems that our conscience of the space where we move, relate and exist increased significantly. Paradoxically, we feel more isolated. The number of ways we have for communication increased largely, even though the number of social relationships did not increase. We also feel the need to constantly use watches, which was compared to the rabbit in "Alice in Wonderland", always in rush, but never knowing exactly where we are going. This increase of the perception field is also present in administration. With the Portuguese membership in the European Union, we became further away from the decision centre. There is another

level of power. We no longer have the power to change all the laws and even some governmental issues. We need to go to Brussels and convince our representatives in order for them to press for changes. Institutions and social structures in Portuguese society are felt as a target in which we project our feelings and insecurities. Instead of blaming or claiming accountable the local institutions we usually blame for everything the government and the country. There is a strong use of these abstract levels of social organization as scapegoats, to systematically project inadequacy, incompetence and responsibility. It was mentioned that it might be painful for the individuals to think that they can have a stronger civil role within society.

Hypothesis:

The perception we have of space (physical, psychical) increased, as well as our perception of the complexity of current life, in recent years. The media, as well as the European Union have a major role in this regard. This is felt as threatening and creating a huge emptiness in individuals. As such there is an urge to find quick answers that can mitigate this feeling. What is important is reaching an answer, any answer. This attempt leads to the production of false answers such as blaming institutions or abstract entities (such as the country) to account for our non-success and to give us a sense of security. Scapegoating institutions is a false answer, a projection of responsibility, nonetheless it appears as an answer for the urgent search for ways not to feel incompetent and powerless.

Convener: Tiago Mendes.

Organisation of the event: Pedro Santos and Tiago Mendes