

**"Switzerland and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 7th 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, 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

1. A Privileged Paradise

There was a feeling that the membership represented a privileged part of society and this 'privilege in Switzerland' was a theme throughout all three parts of the Listening Post. Education was a preoccupation for many, both in terms of the standards & rigour of education available and also and perhaps more importantly for what education represents – a preparation for the future for the children of today. Is education doing enough? Instilling the 'right' values? What are these values and how are they shifting?

Living in Paradise was a common theme. Switzerland is viewed by many as idyllic with a high standard of living, natural beauty, good security and a balance of international and local ways of living. It was postulated that Switzerland may well be seen as more of a Paradise to outsiders than to locals. There is a broad definition of 'Paradise' on an individual level, be it as a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic society, the natural beauty, the relative financial security and safety in living here or the high standards of education, job opportunities and wealth that exist. However Paradise is defined, there was a strong sentiment that people were grateful to live in Switzerland. A recurring related theme was that of 'privilege', the privileged position members feel relative to others and the privileged position of Switzerland in comparison with other countries. After all, living in Paradise is a privileged position.

2. Security

There was also a pre-occupation with managing and structuring time. In busy families finding time for each child, for the parental pair and the family as a whole can be a conundrum, especially when complicated by maintaining connections with family members living abroad in different time zones. For people studying or seeking work structuring and using time can also be

challenging especially in face of the seeming split between the hyper-busyness of those in work and the lives (and status) of those not in work. There was discussion about how satisfying it is to be at home in the role of Mother or Care-Giver and whether people who are not in employment are valued in society. This raises the question, who am I without work? And how do I form my identity?

The theme of security seemed to hold the shadow side of the Privileged Paradise highlighted above. Traditionally Switzerland has been a secure country with low crime rates and amongst the highest levels of education, healthcare and GDP per capita in the world. Feelings of the Secure Privileged Paradise were alive and well and yet there were also concerns about burglaries, personal attacks, personal health and the difficulty of finding steady, satisfying employment. These all served to highlight a concern that perhaps all is not as it seems on the surface and that things can shift very quickly from security to insecurity, which itself creates feelings of insecurity. The financial crisis can also of course create feelings of uncertainty and this aspect of insecurity was most keenly felt by those seeking employment or of making major transitions such as one group member leaving a well-paid job in order to take up volunteer work abroad.

3. Openness & Integration or Closed Borders and Fear of Disintegration

The upcoming vote concerning the admission of Bulgarian and Romanian workers into Switzerland raised a number of questions including whether the vote is being politically manipulated in order to protect Switzerland, the role of the Far Right Party and the question of boundaries and how open Switzerland wishes to be towards other countries. There was also focus on the role of history in creating and protecting Switzerland. A tension was held between an underlying feeling of insecurity, manifested by attacks on family members, burglaries, health concerns and the difficulty of seeking employment and of finding a secure income being felt by several members & their families and on the other hand a positive view of Switzerland as a little Paradise.

Questions about how open Switzerland is to foreigners and to other ideas and about how to integrate new businesses and the influx of people to the country were also prevalent. In difficult situations foreigners can quickly become the scapegoats expressed through the feeling that “80% of crimes are committed by foreigners.” Views of this sort can serve to cover up the differences that exist between the different linguistic and cultural groups, which have always existed in Switzerland and it was acknowledged that it is the differences with foreigners which seemed to over-shadow the many internal differences. The upcoming vote took some energy and raised the role of the Right Party, which now represents 30% of the population and of the role that the far Right has traditionally taken in protecting Swiss borders from 'invasion' from too many foreigners and of preserving a Swiss way of life.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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 analysis has been distilled into the following inter-related hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Paradise Lost?

Analysis: The theme of Paradise was central in much of the discussion, becoming, indeed a major preoccupation for the group, which is similar to an exploration in last year's Listening Post. Switzerland has magnificent natural beauty (60% mountains), which many group members appreciate. However the country has few natural resources and therefore relies on trade as a way to survive. A current preoccupation seems to focus on how many people and which ones to 'allow in to Paradise'. The group was reminded by one member, whose own family had emigrated to the US, that until relatively recently many Swiss emigrated in order to find a better life and to avoid hardship in their home country. It is easy, on the surface, to believe that the Paradise of Switzerland has long been in existence, was created solely by the Swiss and is perhaps the preserve of the 'real Swiss'. However, its creation is due to the *mélange* of Swiss leaving for other countries, some returning with new ideas and ways of life; and the arrival of immigrants into Switzerland developing new skills and trades. The banking industry in Geneva and the watch industry in the Jura region and the creation of major roads & rail networks by Italian workers were cited as examples of industries which have been created based on the skills and labour of other countries. Thus a paradox seems to exist in Paradise, namely that Switzerland has been created through the migration of peoples and yet now Switzerland is struggling with accepting a further influx of migrant workers from Bulgaria and Romania. A helpful metaphor was used of Switzerland as a Castle in which the inhabitants try to defend their territory from potential threat from outsiders. It was identified that this is a defence in which a population as diverse as the Swiss with over 20% coming from abroad creates a common enemy outside of its own borders in order to maintain the current standard of living and defend the 'Castle' or 'Paradise'.

Hypothesis: Once people are 'inside Switzerland', many believe themselves to be in Paradise and despite their many differences in background create a common bond which is to defend the country and thereby their own standard of life from over-exposure to and potential change by 'foreign ways of life'. Because people are in Paradise, they might then start to believe that they merit their position of privilege. When they believe they merit their place in Paradise, they can put themselves into the role of *judges* with respect to others who are currently outside the country. This can lead to a superior attitude particularly with respect to 'undesirable' foreigners and a rather 'egoistic' approach to life, which perhaps covers up a fear of the erosion of a secure and comfortable way of life.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Privilege

Analysis: The metaphor of living in a Castle clearly speaks to this sense of privilege and the desire to defend that privilege from external threat – for example concerns about the influx of many foreigners, be they migrant workers or expatriates, who enjoy an even more highly privileged position in society. In a secure country like Switzerland, people are free from threat of war, famine or political/religious persecution to make

choices about how they live their lives, which is a position of privilege. It is as if 'privilege' carries the positive aspect of security, which is something that many people in Switzerland benefit from. This enables many to be able to be generous, to reach out and work with non-profit organisations and NGO's and it was striking how many members of the Listening Post were engaged in volunteer work of some kind. A useful comment was made that "because we *almost* have it all in Switzerland, we believe that we *can* have it all and this in itself creates stress as there is a relentless striving for more." This might account for some of the stress concerning 'time management' as people are striving to 'have it all' – good relationships, satisfying secure work, giving back to the community and plentiful and diverse leisure opportunities. However, this can leave individuals with feelings of being over-stretched. There was also a questioning of this privilege, especially coming from the younger generation. For example, one young group member is leaving well-paid employment to do volunteer work abroad and several people with children and teenagers in the group expressed a feeling that young people 'rebel' against the privilege of their lives through nostalgia for liberty and idealism and wanting more challenges in life. It is as if the security that Switzerland enjoys underpins much of the sense of privilege and that this security is seen as threatened by international issues.

Hypothesis: Living a privileged life in Switzerland can lead people to 'down play' their issues in comparison with those of others worse off, almost as if there is no right to discuss issues of fragility or difficulty in the face of enormous difficulties faced by others elsewhere. And indeed, it seemed difficult for the group as a whole to tolerate more difficult feelings without a regular reminder of how good life is here relative to others. If this is the case, this can lead to members of society to unconsciously conspire not to talk about certain issues as a way of ignoring things they do not want to face. Because of this, it is easier to project problems onto international issues and foreigners, who can then carry many of the more difficult feelings we may have about insecurity and fragility. The other consequence might be that there is less 'deep' connection in communities as people feel unable to talk to their real feelings or problems and thus the Privileged society may also be a veneer over people's feelings of loss about a more intimate connection.

Convener: Heather Cairns-Lee