

**"Britain and the World
the Spring of 2005"**
Report of a Listening Post
held in Swansea
on Thursday 8th June



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. The members engaged quickly with the task and there was an intense hour of powerful reflection.

Four main preoccupations emerged.

1. The environment, and global warming

People tend to make even short journeys by car when they could walk. Many make frequent journeys by air, often for short holidays or even week end breaks. Fears were expressed that terrible consequences might be stored up which might impact only on later generations.

Some of the solutions which in different ways are put forward were described as simplistic and/or dictatorial, and having the potential for causing greater problems. For example, talk of banning SUVs. The (Welsh) Assembly appears to have only one policy, of onshore wind farms. Only large scale solutions, which might also appeal to big business, are put forward, when smaller scale options such as better insulation of houses, and small hydro-electric schemes, as in Scandinavia, appear not to be conceived. An example was quoted of someone who had trees planted in proportion to his use of air travel.

Vested interests may affect solutions that are proposed. There is scepticism about scientists and what they say, and whether they are affected by their paymasters. A sub-theme was the way in which scientific work is simplistically presented by the media, which often presents ideas as established and ignores whether scientific debate continues. Everything must be presented in sound bites, or as though by powerpoint presentation.

2. Towns and Cities are out of control

At week ends many of our towns and city centres become out of control, by primarily young people who are themselves out of control. A member was asked by a young

woman "do you have a shag for tonight?", and neither she nor her two male companions seemed to find this at all unusual.

To use a word with some political currency, there is little respect. Family structures are weaker, divorce and family break up is common, children are less disciplined. Families do not function as much as close units. People spend their time in front of computer screens, families do not eat together as much, some do not have a table capable of accommodating all its members. Material needs predominate, and in this post Christian society ethical considerations are weaker. This, however, contrasts strongly with what is seen as the strongly moralistic culture of the culture of the Islamic community within Britain.

3. Erosion of Community

An anecdote - a school group who talked loudly long into the night at a camp site, while the teachers made no attempt to lead them to consider others.

We tend to walk by on the other side, fearing for our own safety, and of being made to feel foolish as a nosey parker.

The young now set out to become out of control. A book editor sees much chick lit, in which going out to get drunk and laid is offered as an acceptable norm. Women behave in a laddish way, giving them a form of equality with what has previously been only male behaviour.

4. The political world

We re-elected Tony Blair as Prime Minister despite what appears to be our great distrust of him. We did not turn to the Conservatives as they seem unable to choose a normal person as their leader.

We are doing all right as a nation, we are uninterested in the world outside our nation. When we vote we look to ourselves and our interests. We vote not so much according to policies, which differ little between the parties, nor according to ideologies, which no longer exist, but according to the personalities, who we perceive through the media, particularly television. Since public meetings have declined our perceptions of politicians are therefore disembodied, along with so much else of our experiences.

We vote by default, against the alternative that we dislike the most.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Of the twenty or so themes identified by the members, these have been distilled into two major themes.

1. Pessimism (when spoken the word produced laughter)

The predominant rotweiler style of interviewing disallows acknowledgement of anything good.

The ubiquity and speed of communication, led by the media and also through the internet, gives immediate currency to the bad news, which is what gains our attention.

The culture of the individual was also seen as contributing to pessimism, as it contributes to the detraction from any sense of being part of a group.

2. The increasing isolation of the individual

There is a lack of care for others. People can be isolated even in their families. When we see someone on television we watch them as an individual isolated from the person we watch. We isolate ourselves in our cars, and take our children to school in the security of SUVs. We fear that there is a paedophile on every corner.

More is communicated, by eg TV , but we handle it differently. Seeing something on television is not at all the same as experiencing it directly. We can be moved by TV to give money to aid organisations, but then revert to the habits which contribute to the poverty which then requires aid. Compassion is fashionable, but bracelets which denote sympathy for world poverty are made in third world sweat shops.

We use the expression "out there", from our isolated position of "inside". A member spoke of a book by Asimov in which no one was ever in a room with others, for fear of contamination by germs, and all communication was by telecommunications. A murder was committed, but how and by who?

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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

Analysis:

We as the generation of the sixties decisively rejected the beliefs of our parents but have introduced no structures that replace those that we displaced. Following generations have not reacted against us by introducing new structures, but have continued and taken further the hedonism of our generation. We contrast this with what we see as the firm structures of Islam.

Hypothesis:

We lack structures which would allow us to feel held and contained. Clear structures would provide a defined space in which to play and would allow us freedom. Since we have no rules we do not know how better to break them. We are therefore unable to pay attention to others because we are too busy trying to "hang onto ourselves".

Analysis and Hypothesis 2.

Analysis:

The lack of structures itself leaves us with too little assistance in finding and devising new structures. The current practice of long work hours provide a semblance of structure, but nevertheless represents a manic defence against the very lack which it seeks to alleviate.

Hypothesis:

We project our internal chaos onto the external factor of the climate, where we can deplore how we contribute to its potentially disastrous change. We also project it onto the uncontrolled young, who in essence behave as we did at their age.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3.

Analysis:

Nothing or little was said of politics as it is seen as irrelevant.

Hypothesis:

Politicians are not experienced as substantial enough to be able to carry meaning for us. Consequently we cannot even hate them nor carry what might be hate into action, and hence we continue to vote Tony Blair into office.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4.

Analysis:

Since time was running out there was no further analysis, but a further hypothesis was made.

Hypothesis:

The process of change requires the death of something in order that it may be replaced. The process of death and mourning is intrinsically difficult. Something in our society has died but it cannot be replaced until it has well enough been identified and mourned.

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