

**"Britain and the World
Spring 2005"**

**Report of a Spring Listening Post
held on Wednesday 20th April 2005
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm**

**College Hall,
University of London,
Malet Street,
London WC1E 7HZ**



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 these 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 'social' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2, the aim was to identify collectively the major themes emerging from Part 1. These centred on issues of death, transition and succession, which reflected wider global and societal dynamics arising from the death of the Pope, the UK General Election and the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles. Associated pre-occupations were with loss of integrity, disengagement, fear of difference and mistrust of leadership and these took the thinking forward to understanding what was being reflected in the wider society. Themes were sifted to form the following three inter-related statements:

a) Public mourning of the loss of an ideal: death of the Pope

A sense of loss expressed in the LP was sparked off by the death of the Pope and, as one member described it, by the 'wall to wall coverage' of global public mourning following his death, which had been deeply affecting. Members differed on whether his Papacy had been one of reform, as a major force in bringing down communism, or of continuing oppression, with Papal rulings against contraception being held responsible for tying women to child-birth and the ban on condoms to the increase in Aids. Whilst members expressed a range of views about the influence he exerted whilst in office, the power enshrined in the Papal position at a global level was not in question.

The LP expressed a broader sense of loss and feelings of disengagement from once held dominant ideals: one spoke of disengagement from the Catholic faith and from religion, towards a pre-occupation with the General Election as being more important, whilst another felt disengaged from politics for 'its lack of integrity or courage' and that there was more potential for change in religion.

Questions were raised as to whether a religious leader could also be an inclusive global leader with moral integrity, given that the Papal role as guardian of Catholicism was thought to lend itself to polarisation: those who follow the faith belong, but those who do not face exclusion. A member spoke of the 'scary' climate in the USA with right wing fundamentalist Christians purveying a religio-moral stance, a belief in 'the right thing', thereby reinforcing a culture of fear where the righteous are offered salvation whilst others perish.

b) Transition and succession: ambivalence towards current leadership

The LP considered figures in leadership positions, all of whom were found to fall short in providing moral integrity, or of being leaders capable of transforming the mood of hopelessness, disengagement, distance and apathy at a personal, local or global community level.

The range of examples began with the choice of the current Pope. There was a view that his selection had been an evasive action; he presented the 'safe' choice with conservative views and advanced age. LP members held little hope that he would bring about a re-balancing on a global level, contrasting with the idealised hoped-for black Pope. The LP found inertia and disengagement from global leadership, as reflected in the UN's response to Dhafur and Bosnia. A reading of societal and global dynamics indicated that momentous world events were quickly forgotten, as symbolised by Prince Charles' 'accidental' handshake with Mugabe. Closer to home, members spoke of apathy and frustration with political parties 'saying the same thing' and of the 'smoothing over' process of 'unthinking' policies, as in 'put matron back in charge', with its fantasy that small measures would resolve big issues. Frustration was expressed with the press and media leaders, for their absence of integrity in covering serious issues. In covering the marriage of Prince Charles and Camilla for example, they had reported on the 'disasters' leading up to the wedding, and glamour style detail of 'the day', rather than take responsibility to debate the wider issues of leadership vested in monarchy. It appeared to the LP there was no leader fit to succeed.

The question was put: what does the citizen aspire to, in the absence of leaders who will take up moral authority and 'spiritual charge' on a global scale, in leading long-term sensible action on global issues, for example the prevention of environmental disaster?

c) Retreat, escapism and fear of difference

LP imagery was of flight from a fearful world populated with disaster into one, which felt small, private, meaningful and safe. There were observations of a society anxious about engaging with difference, lest putting one's head above the parapet might end in an attack on personal identity, or of failing others' expectations of doing 'the right thing' and being abandoned. Lack of differentiation had led us, as one member put it to 'a state of not knowing the not me'. There was nostalgia for the past, where families debated their differences in 'lively banter'. The LP observed a retreat from social intercourse, in the defensive withdrawal into escapist behaviours, for example in the vicarious pre-occupations with 'reality TV' shows, [playing out the dynamics of belonging/exclusion of group members, along with the feared consequences of breakdown of the group], documentaries pre-occupied with cosmetic body surgery, [depicting self-inflicted breaking down of unacceptable body images] and 'soaps', playing out scenarios depicting mistrust, damage and threat in local communities [playing out fears about the breakdown of society].

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively trying to identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at this time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the participants 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. This analysis has been distilled into the following hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Public mourning for the death of a way of life

Analysis:

There was a view that the Pope's long life had represented an example of survival through a history of global changes and world events. As such, he had symbolised hope and survival over adversity, which made him a figure in whom people could identify their idealised hopes. His death symbolised the death of an ideal, as in the archetypal father, with authority and influence over change. Members felt that the public mourning following his death was underpinned by society's unconscious fears of annihilation, which had left society bereft and forlornly searching for a replacement for its projections. There was a sense that society did not possess the tools to move on in a world, which has changed so rapidly and combined with a series of global events to become overwhelming and threatening to stability. The LP's images reflected the retreat from engagement in situations in which we are reminded of loss and trauma. There was a flight into nostalgia for a safe, certain past when 'we knew the enemy', whereas 'now we do not know who our enemy is', nor what today's leaders look like. The state of numbness and shock following loss was reflected in the LP, with its difficulty in working through hypotheses and moving on in understanding current societal dynamics.

Hypothesis:

Society has experienced so much change and so much loss but without opportunity to grieve. Because the Pope had lived a long life, experienced the major losses, global events and also personal suffering, his death provided the time for people to express grief collectively. His death represented all that had been lost. Society could mourn publicly in this way for the death of a way of life.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Social disintegration

Analysis:

At the same time, the LP felt that in order to move on, it was necessary to be reminded of our history and ensure the next generation can connect with the effects of what we do to each other, for example in war, to have the important reference of the past upon which to base a future with integrity. There was a sense that in a world with rapid change, the old boundary conditions have shifted and are less easy to distinguish, for

example male/female roles being more interchangeable. With old divisions gone, it is difficult to identify friend from enemy, so that fear and anxiety dominates. The search has proved hopeless for a leader who will act as rescuer, so that now there is a mistrust and reluctance to delegate responsibility to leaders who might be fallible in uncertain times. Consequently, we withdraw from the effort, to safer private ground. A member's imagery was of the peace and tranquillity of a private garden as a sanctuary from the noise and disruption of the outside world.

Hypothesis:

Because of a rapidly changing world, society is being experienced in a state of disintegration. We struggle to make sense by trying to enable succession, passing on our experience for future generations, but we find it impossible to pave the way. Whilst we want to move on, it is difficult to do so, just as, when being caught in a minefield there is no guaranteed safe ground, neither staying in the same place nor in stepping out as the dangers are unknown. So members of society are left floundering and attempt to retreat into personal territory, which appears safer.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Hope in society: productive and defensive uses

Analysis:

Views varied on the role played by hope. Members felt that whilst hope is present in society, there is a feeling that it is not allowed, for example in the progress made in Northern Ireland. As one member put it 'Hope is a difficult place to be, but works towards reparation'. Another referred to progress made in society in the past century, which [in Western societies] has given people longer and healthier lives, with advances in medical science bringing forward new possibilities, birth without human conception for example. However, there was also caution expressed about a society being drawn by false hope into a fantasy that 'anything is possible'; the use of 'nip and tuck' cosmetic surgery for example encouraging ideas of eternal life, and away from the reality of lives elsewhere cut short by poverty, acts of genocide, war and natural disasters. The LP saw the challenge to be one of encounter, in a world that has become a smaller place in terms of its sophisticated methods of global technology and communication, but overwhelming in terms of societies' responsibility on a global scale. Some saw hope as important for moving on, whereas despair meant keeping alive lost ideals and avoiding responsibility for change and progress. There was a view that hope could be a defensive overlay for society's apparent paralysis in acting on global issues through feelings of guilt and impotence, in the face of overwhelming catastrophes like genocide.

Hypothesis:

Because of the sense of social disintegration [see hypothesis 2 above], we grab onto hope for a future. Medical advances and the development of 'nip and tuck' cosmetic surgery to disguise disintegration and ageing, encourage false hopes for eternal life and a pre-occupation with staying forever young. At the same time, we become oblivious to the brevity of life, so become closed in our thinking towards the realities of mortality and suffering. Members of society seek to be hopeful but in the nature of basic assumption activity, they are drawn instead to magical fantasies of eternal life, so deny the reality of mortality and thereby responsibility for today.

Convener: Christine Cave