

"Older Women and the World the Spring of 2009"

Report of a Listening Post
held on 30th 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 experiences 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

In Part Two, the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following four interrelated themes:

1. Equality and Inequality

There was a shared sense of a massive growth in inequality and poverty in the last decade alongside the arrival of all the new equalities legislation – brought forward it was noted mostly by Labour MP's who lacked any experience of grass roots activism. Lots of equalities policies work done by Local Authorities but lesbian and gay policies still are hard to find. A GLA consultation by the mayor of London on domestic violence has a BNP member on the panel and as a result women's groups have expressed different views about participating. Some smaller groups see it as a space to voice their views but a larger more established group has said no and to stand firm as strength comes from having all our voices together. There was concern about such fragmentation as it means women's groups don't come together. "We are like lots of boils" (later redefined as 'bubbles') active under the ground but which are split and don't cohere into a single powerful voice. Faith issues were seen as inter related with poverty and equality issues and a source of tensions. Someone had attended a very large meeting in east London of 600 people. No woman spoke and a powerful lobby harangued the audience against support for education around sex and relationships in primary schools.

2. Privatising public services

A concern about a top down style of government and erosion of civil rights was accompanied by a "sense that we don't do anything about it." A whole regulatory system tied up with privatisation has taken over in a huge shift over the past decade. One person said "I think I've been asleep. . . I felt very confused and it took me years to realise that the values had shifted. How did it all happen?" Everyone now understood that just a few private companies like Capita now dominated local public

services and increasingly ran large parts of the education system – exam boards, OFSTED, schools, some local authority dept's, agencies for teachers. So many different aspects of our lives are now dominated by these private public services. "Everybody is becoming agents of the government in one way or another as work follows the money/ contracts. It was concluded that 'We are all part of it.'

Huge amounts of money were known to be involved in the extra cost of such privatising. One member remembered a Dified person saying in 2008 "this (ie contracting out) is not about saving money – this is going to cost a lot more." KPMG get contract after contract; PWC get huge sums to look into this or that. Government ministers leave power and appear on their boards. On an international scale, Naomi Klein's book *The shock doctrine* conveyed how disasters are now the scene for corporations to move in. For example, the New Orleans educational system was privatised following the Katrina floods. A recent investigative report by another young woman journalist also revealed which companies benefited from the £millions of expenditure in Iraq.

3. Greed for money and power

The current economic crisis has exposed rampant greed. One person noted a certain satisfaction in that it had confirmed "I hadn't been mad" over the past two decades in wanting to keep challenging what was happening. Whereas, at first, the economic crisis seemed to provide a space where we could rethink as a society, there was concern now that this momentum was slipping away – as also happened after the big demonstration against the Iraq War. Despite its initial scale and enormous diversity the anti war movement had little or no impact on decisions by government. There is no listening to what is being said or expressed. The behavior of the top bankers, politicians (mainly, if not all, men) was seen as outrageous. It leaves people feeling they had been taken for a ride. Madoff was mentioned as an example of how people had been exploited. Why, one member asked, do we sit and let them take bonuses in the worst crisis ever? Why was there no real anger on the streets. . .? In another era people would have been out there "bombing banks, and occupying their fancy yachts." It was asked at what point do we have any power. Will the imminent arrival of the Tories push things to the edge?

There was a sense that the media hugely misleads and misrepresents and re-channels such anger with its focus on icons and celebrity. But the simplistic flow was also experienced as quite compulsive in the way that you could find yourself wanting to read on about Peaches Geldorf! Why is this happening to us? What is the root of a rapid disintegration? Aggressive responses by the police to demonstrations were also seen to play a part in suppressing political demonstrations (a recent killing/ beatings at the G20 and the move to militaristic style and uniforms. This follows from government decisions to fund such re- equipment ie. political choices. But ultimately there was a sense that the exacerbation of terrorism lay in the governments own support for the Iraq war.

4. Power and governance

Why has a Labour Govt taken up such persistent marketisation of everything? One person spoke of working very closely with senior Labour politicians in opposition before 1997 (including the likes of Estelle Morris, Jack Straw, Stephen Byers) and how "there was not a whisper between us and them. But the minute they had got into power they crossed to the other side and debated against what they had said in opposition!" Whereas, it was always understood what the Tories were up to, New Labour's rapid selling off of the welfare state was always difficult to reconcile with ones expectations. It had become normative so rarely now in the public eye and experienced as 'hidden.' It was also

experienced as a betrayal and the sense now was many politicians were liars. One member spoke of a conversation with a woman trade union activist who had become an MP as to her experience. She had told her that back bench MP's had no influence at all – it was all decided at the top. This pattern was replicated now locally in the new structures in local councils. Yet LP members shared a memory of how you could once get a slot to speak to at the old Council committees, be heard and have a sense of influencing decision making. While this hadn't entirely disappeared it was much diminished by the power of the new 'cabinet' members to overrule the views of Scrutiny Committees as witnessed in a recent housing meeting in Camden.

Another member spoke of how head teachers see school governors as “just a group of people that they control.” She had witnessed how a group of three black parents were treated by a head teacher as though they knew nothing about how to run an organisation. They were never asked what they could contribute. Yet when she herself asked afterwards she had found that they were all finance and human resources professionals! In her view teachers were compliant and terrified to challenge. In other spheres like the governance of some larger housing associations, tenants were also only just making their voices heard on review bodies but had no real power. It was as if a bullying culture now exists from the top down which is endemic. Some people are fearful to speak up, for others it is more about a culture of silence and for others about a culture of whingeing rather than actively opposing what is going on – like working longer hours. There was it was felt a widespread ‘silencing’. One member described training situations were most people would feedback afterwards that they feel more confident to challenge as a result of her course – but there was usually one person (often male) who would take up a compliant stance and see her course 'as anti establishment'.

5. Young people and inspiration

It was thought that school education was also encouraging young people not to be critical and this was resulting in less creative and imaginative school leavers. “The schools push knowledge into them and just test that.” Information which was IT driven was seen as replacing discussion and debate. With the result that people don't communicate as much. It was hard on young people. There was suppression of play strategy – the Mayor of London has wiped out the play strategy/ support group, a sense that prison was the new strategy, plus the general demonisation of the young (a typical headline was ‘Yob – 14’). This created a defensive fear leading to gang culture (and its associated problems like knife crime and rape of young women). Yet lots of young people in their 20-30s were also known to be active, thoughtful and determined to make changes eg. around disability and international or climate change issues and other approaches around non violent action. They were very inspirational for older people.

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

Greed and arrogance: power and powerlessness

Analysis: There was much concern about the lack of listening in the political system and of not having a political voice that can be heard along with an active silencing of dissenting voices. There is a sense of powerlessness at the absence of these spaces to express beliefs around values of equality and social justice, fairness, and respect for different views. The arrogance of the bankers and politicians had shocked us. But the arrogance was also present in eg. the way a head teacher perceived parents. A greed for power as well as money seems to characterise our times and it is accompanied by overweening arrogance and a bullying culture. The memory of John Smith's death was then recalled and of how people at the time had expressed a real sadness (which is now unimaginable) at a politician's death. This posed the question as to what he had represented for us and what are we now missing? (. . . a different set of moral and humanitarian values, a standing up to power (ie. Thatcher), conscience, articulating a different voice, a belief in the collective and public sphere, a sense of care and security of a valued welfare state and public institutions. . . .(Both the deaths of Robin Cook and David Kelly were also still felt to carry symbolic meaning). As a society we have allowed our actual political leaders to endorse rampant individualism, the valorisation of the market and the commodification of everything, involving the selling off much of the welfare state, and undermining of pensions. While having opposed these tendencies members noted how we were inevitably also sucked into its myriad of small ways as active accomplices.

Hypothesis: Because we have undermined the 'social mothering' provided by a strong welfare state and because eg. church structures are weakened or discredited (eg. Ryan report on abuse), we are acutely experiencing as a society the absence of structures providing a necessary containment of primitive anxieties. Our fears about survival and society are being expressed as greed (and envy) and people grab/ compete for material things or power in an illusion of gaining a kind of security. In the absence of a politics which discusses such matters we are unable to think properly and collectively about what it means to become an ageing society or falling apart economically and the impact of the end of the age of plenty.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

'Bubbles' and 'boils' under-the-surface

Analysis: There was a sense that the future feels fragile and too scary to engage with. A sense of 'living in the moment' was seen as more satisfying. The feeling was not of feeling engaged but more one of being frustrated. There was still a sense of loss of the hope of the social movements of previous decades but now also a shared sense of wanting to move forward. So the mood was not gloomy and no longer one of the mourning which has so characterised those on the left since the 1990s. There was much mention of the inspiration drawn from the activity of younger people and of a generosity of spirit which inspires them and can be seen as countering that of the greed in society. There was awareness of many small projects doing good work with good values and minimal egotism around climate change, human and animal rights etc. In addition the anti war movement had made links and active networks as a consequence of its huge diversity even if it had not influenced decisions. An anti-Iraq war vigil continues in Parliament Square despite attempts to close it down. Talk of this was characterised as 'bubbles underground' which at some point might come up together and cohere

when/ if 'something' triggers this. It was also seen as 'bubbles of heat in a hot desert' where lots of little things are going on that we don't hear about. But these 'bubbles' early on in the discussion had first been characterised as 'boils'. This better captures the more destructive elements also possibly emerging in society like the BNP. And parallels can be sought with how fascist ideas also came to cohere in alienated groups in society in Germany in the early 1930s.

Formal politics appears stuck and embodies an absence of creative desire in a heavily top down political culture. There was a widespread absence of moral principle by bankers and politicians eg. expenses amongst MP's although the awarding of government contracts and practice of government ministers taking up roles on the boards of companies bidding for public contracts was felt to be more reprehensible although less in the public eye.

Hypothesis: Corporate greed has become a norm and societal anger about this could explode as 'bubbles' or 'boils' coming to the surface of society and find a voice. The positive side of the existence of so many creative 'bubbles' operating below the radar is a hopeful sign. It represents a social generosity in many new ways and is a counter ethos to that of individualism and to individual and corporate greed. But such groupings don't cohere easily and lack power and access to political debate. The resulting challenge for us is how to enable new spaces for both debate and so we can engage in creating a fairer, more equal society.

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