

**"The UK and the World
at the Summer of 2005"**
Report of a Listening Post
held in Belfast
on Monday 4th July



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 collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

(a) Self interest versus giving

There is confusion between our sense of ourselves and of the other. It is as if we are all in free fall. In giving, are we merely giving to receive or are acts of charity genuine?

This was in the context of the Live8 concert and whether people went to hear top bands or because they supported the cause. There was a mixture of cynicism and support. This theme was about the nature and capacity of human beings. Are we any different than we were thousands of years ago? Is it just the context that has changed? This was part of a view that people don't really change but at the same time there was an optimism about our young people. Can they be different from us and provide a better future? There was a sense of people looking for something beyond themselves.

(b) Self destruction and impending disaster

There was a feeling of lack of direction on global issues. It is unclear who is managing this or providing world governance. Is this the end of democracy? There was concern about the speed of change and about a loss of connectedness between people and between people and nature. There was concern about global issues such as climate change yet also some optimism that maybe we need to be pushed to the edge of chaos and then people or organisations with sufficient power might take positive action.

(c) Leadership

This theme was about leadership, authority, power and control and the influence of a few individuals to effect change at the same time as questioning the ability of how we,

as individuals can bring about change. What is the relationship between government and the multinationals? The media and celebrities were thought to provide undue influence.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members worked with the information resulting from parts 1 and 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. There was a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience and this analysis has been distilled into the following hypotheses.

Analysis and hypothesis 1.

Ambivalence about having needs but also having too much

Analysis:

The membership talked about people having a series of needs which they are constantly trying to have met. One member was of the view that, in our society, too many needs are now being satisfied so that people are not experiencing enough pain to galvanise them into action. There is a need for discomfort to stimulate innovation. One member talked about cross-community work that he was involved in with young people and "how the energy crackles". He commented that when they had young people from America visiting, it was hard to get them involved. He wondered if this was a reflection of the society they come from where their needs are saturated with material goods and gadgets. We are also continually bombarded by the media, which is mostly about the bad side of humanity. We are bombarded by criticism.

People are motivated by their needs, and where reciprocity can be achieved by people meeting their own needs through meeting the needs of others, this can be very positive. However, in a materialistic society where many people have so much, there is a concern that there is insufficient motivation to galvanise people into action to challenge the global issues which threaten our existence. People are caught between guilt for having too much and not doing enough to bring about the change needed to help save the world. It is hard in this situation to feel good about oneself.

Hypothesis:

Because of our material comfort and over consumption in the West, members of society struggle with the paradox of an awareness of pain and suffering in the world on one hand, but limited first hand experience of it on the other. Therefore they have no impulse to take action to change things. As a result they experience guilt, alienation and self-loathing.

Analysis and hypothesis 2.

Anxiety about who is pulling our strings

Analysis:

People have the freedom to choose and yet they can so easily be manipulated by a word

from someone in more powerful position. One member asked, "Who encouraged you today or were you discouraged by someone?" Both Bono and Geldoff had to take the first step to get to where they are today. What led them to take that first step and are they now trapped in role? Could this be related to their needs, for example, Geldoff's need to be listened to, to be appreciated? If he were able to recognise that, would he be released from the position where he has now arrived? To what extent is he self-promoting or making a free choice? This is related to our ability to change things and to make a difference.

One member talked about the need for self-awareness and the ability to respond to opportunities because it is right for you to do so. There was a suggestion that we could do something in our local world. People do not want to respond or cannot respond. People in the street have "badness in them" and are unable to face up to things, unable to be strong. There was a feeling of helplessness, of being unable to do anything about this. In particular, people in Northern Ireland experience strong tribal pulls and limited choices. However, there is also a strong pull to move out beyond these. It is important to have an understanding on one's own tribal prejudices and of one's own emotions. Everyone is affected by waves of emotion. It is important to be aware of this so that one can engage one's intelligence and not be victim to one's emotions.

In this rapidly changing world, there are many influences and people can be influenced by a word from someone who has power over them. Decisions which have major impacts on people's lives can be so easily influenced by multiple forces, from those involved in one's everyday lives, to the media, celebrities and world leaders. Once those decisions are made they can trap people to follow a path from which they cannot escape. In the face of this, people feel powerless and do not know what they can do to take control or to make a meaningful contribution to society. Awareness is seen as key to making conscious decisions, aware of what influences are shaping those decisions.

Hypothesis:

Because of a denigration and discrediting of traditional authority figures and institutions, such as politicians and the church, members of society are susceptible to the influence of strong charismatic media figures, even though they know at some level this is misguided. They are uneasy because of the lack of accountability of these people. The result is that members of society feel directionless, fragmented, leaderless and are fearful of anarchy.

Analysis and hypothesis 3.

Anxiety about where inspiration and change will come from

Analysis:

We have lost the ability to come up with fresh, creative solutions to problems. This theme was very much related to the hope members invest in young people. Young people need to be given the chance to lead, to be given responsibility. This was seen to be related to meeting needs, theirs and ours. Providing leadership for others at the same time as meeting your own needs can be very positive if it is done with awareness. Members recognised that often people respond to more responsibility rather than more money.

Giving and reciprocity is a human need and is needed for growth in society. There is self-interest in giving, giving to get something back. If there are no opportunities to give,

people retreat. One member talked about working with young psychiatrically ill people who are so damaged that there is no prospect of them being able to take responsibility. She talked about the significant number of young people who are dead inside. Many young people don't achieve. One member talked about kids who are "bad". He sees them as vulnerable kids who given the right environment can change. Young people may be a source of inspiration but some are very damaged. Where parents don't have their needs met, young people don't have theirs met and the damage becomes irreversible. However, we do need to engage young people, give them responsibility and the opportunity for change. So as part of realising our hope in young people, we all need to do something to enable this. For young people growing up in difficult circumstances, they just need one good person in their lives to give them hope. A lot of young people do listen to what is going on, and do contribute to changing things. Our role is to enable young people, give them space for things to happen. Young people need to be offered alternatives. If given responsibility, for example, to facilitate others, they can do it and it can be very liberating. We can learn a lot about ourselves through engagement with others. This is part of free falling, bumping against others and getting feedback about ourselves.

People look to young people to provide inspiration and to change things for the better. Yet there is a great anxiety about what we have done to our young people, how damaged they are. In some cases they are beyond repair. How can we make reparation and are we willing to do so?

Hypothesis:

Because of disappointment in our failure to come up with fresh creative solutions to social issues, such as poverty, sectarianism and conflict, as members of society, we project onto young people the false hope that somehow they will find a way through this and redeem us. Instead of facing up to the present and the complexity of the issues we face, we abdicate our responsibility for dealing with them and hence fail in our role as parents.

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