

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

United Kingdom at Summer 2016
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on June 29th 2016



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

PART 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles; be they 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': the 'socio' 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.

The themes identified by members were:

Theme 1: Denial – the inability to confront (complex) reality

"Since the referendum outcome was announced, everyone initially wanted to discuss it; then everyone was quietly appalled and fell silent; and now no one will discuss it at all, with some groups and individuals even banning it as a topic for discussion."

"It reminds me of Basil Fawlty's "Don't mention the war", as if the subject has become taboo or a cause of national embarrassment. "

"I decided not to attend a barbecue with friends in order to avoid any tension or arguments resulting from their having voted differently to me."

"There was a clear danger sign from the polls that Leave could win but the Remain side ignored it and were completely unprepared. They are shocked and feel their world order has collapsed. "

"We were sold Brexit on the slogan of '*taking back control*' when we knew it was just a fantasy and that, in reality, control is impossible in such turbulent times."

"Even in London, our ambivalence is clear. I find it hard to talk about the loss of EU membership in personal terms so I try to rationalise it and think about it in abstract."

"We say we want strong leaders but we know that any strong leader would get cut down. So instead we get weak leaders who won't take control. We are divided over whether democracy is a good or a bad thing."

"We don't like the status quo but we're scared to change it too."

"There is a sense that the UK people feel they have lost respect in the world. The world's idea of British values is now being reappraised in the light of this vote. We can't bear to think about what we have done. We feel guilty and ashamed. "

"The pundits' analysis of the England defeat at football had close parallels with the post-referendum commentary: lack of leadership; lack of communication; fear of taking up their own authority and moving forwards with the ball; and fear of taking risks. Perhaps the team was affected emotionally by the referendum."

"There is an abnegation of leadership responsibility: the politicians have projected down to us a problem they couldn't resolve; we did what they asked of us but the problem is still not resolved. This is a political dilemma that was too much for them to bear, so they projected the problem onto us; now we are acting out the irreconcilable conflict of views."

Theme 2: Strong feelings – anger, resentment and blame

"I have been trying to work out why I feel so emotional about it. Many people who voted the other way can't understand why we are all so stirred up. My eldest daughter's told me she was in tears at work, and could not account for why she felt such a great sense of loss. She said it felt like a 'bereavement'.

"My neighbour was abused in the street for voting to Leave. This is just as bad as wolf-whistling at someone – the kind of intolerant behaviour from the Seventies we don't expect to see any more. It went underground for a while but these expressions of superiority and contempt for others who hold different opinions or just are different have now resurfaced."

"This was always going to be a decision taken at an emotional level, so facts and economic arguments were never going to be influential."

"It caused me to be on the receiving end of a furious diatribe from a long-standing friend, whom I fear may not want to meet up with me just because of our differing views on the EU."

"There is a very strong anti-establishment feeling around the world, with far right and far left parties doing well in countries such as Austria, Spain, Greece and France."

"There are parallels between the UK referendum and the US election, both of which centre on the demonising and scapegoating of the outsider. There is fear of outsiders coming into communities and taking jobs and houses that belong to the insiders, except that in reality our public services could not survive without outsiders. "

"The Brexit campaign is demonised as a desire to get rid of foreigners when it is only a desire to control the population flow."

"There is no safe space in this debate: everyone holding any viewpoint is blamed by somebody else for the outcome or aftermath."

"The vote didn't give us an adequate chance to say what we wanted to happen. We don't feel to blame for what happens, whichever way we voted, so we look for scapegoats."

"I can't believe a decision so important was given to the people – it's what Governments are for."

"Watching Wimbledon this afternoon, there was a match between Federer and an unknown British player, Marcus Willis whose ranking (according to the TV commentators) suggested he didn't belong on Centre Court. He was an interloper, enjoying himself and playing without inhibition as if he didn't know his place. He was challenging the establishment, and not showing due respect. This is a metaphor for what is happening in the UK. Jeremy Corbyn is another outsider who doesn't know his place and is challenging the status quo."

Theme 3: Threat to identity and existence

"I am an immigrant with a British passport, but this referendum outcome makes it harder for me to feel British."

"I wonder if the referendum result caused the football team to lose, as if they unconsciously felt they no longer belonged in a European tournament."

"I have an image of Britain as a group of people adrift in a small boat – like the boat people crossing the Mediterranean to Europe – cut off from the mainland and lost at sea with no sight of land. The vote for Brexit is a similar act of desperation from people who feel dispossessed, are concerned only with their own survival and feel that they have nothing much left to lose."

"This mirrors the experience of many people living in towns down the East coast of England, where UKIP has the strongest foothold."

"Economic arguments for the Remain campaign were identified with the rich, who have everything. They seemed irrelevant to the poor."

"The economy is something rich people make money out of. The losers are always ordinary people."

"Young people have a more internationalist outlook so they don't identify with Britishness in the same way as we older people do. Some don't identify with the EU either, so they don't care enough to vote either way. Some express this by going off to become jihadists – it is a different outlook, not a better or worse one."

"For young people to say their votes should count more (because they have to live longer with the consequences of the decision) disregards our greater life experience and acceptance of complexity (rather than the naïve simplicity of idealism)."

"Those on the Leave side aren't at all triumphant now; they are very defensive about it. They are as frightened and uncertain about the future as we are."

"Young people have a sense of depletion after the result. They don't understand what has happened. Perhaps they feel that to vote you have to be certain, and that they didn't have enough information to choose properly. "

"It feels like a difficult moment for the world, with mass migration creating turbulence that people haven't had time to process. They experience this as wholly threatening and bad and do not see the opportunity or look for the good as well as the bad."

"Even though foreign nationals know they aren't going to be repatriated, they still feel rejected and at risk. It is very uncomfortable for them."

"London seems very dejected. I don't see any euphoria but I assume people must be celebrating in other parts of the country."

"The EU is stubbornly wedded to its vision. It is their fault for treating David Cameron as a fool. Institutions have to change or die. Many people, including Mervyn King and Yanis Varoufakis, believe that the EU will disintegrate now. "

"There is a sense of panic about, and a loss of trust. Instead of evacuating the aircraft in an orderly fashion, following the instructions we were given, everyone is pulling the ripcord as they jump out and creating chaos everywhere."

"There is a feeling that things are quite dangerous at the moment. It is something that was there beneath the surface all along but could not be voiced, and now it is being voiced."

"It feels as though my core beliefs have been threatened. It's as if my connection to the rest of the world has been severed. "

"I went to do a group consultation on the morning after the vote and all the UK nationals were sitting on one side and all the non-UK nationals were on the other side. I was shocked by the projections flying around."

PART 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 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.

Analysis 1: Denial – the inability to confront (complex) reality

The EU referendum presented us with a binary choice between two conflicting aspects of our complex identity (an island that is part of a continent) and two conflicting means of self-preservation: self-sufficiency (the individual) and tribal unity (the group).

The politicians panicked and washed their hands of responsibility for migrants and refugees, and made the people choose before the problem got out of hand over the summer months. What they should have done is continued trying to accept and live with the conflict

between free movement and free trade but instead they made us choose because they could not do so themselves.

Being forced into such a binary choice destroyed all possibility of thirdness (the shared space of inter-subjectivity) or ambivalence and forced us to regress into a primitive (paranoid-schizoid) state of polarity that cannot link or think about events. We are variously embodying, projecting or acting out that conflict because our feelings overwhelm us and prevent us from thinking rationally, and because we lack leadership to provide the containment that might have helped us to take back control over ourselves or take responsibility for what is happening to us.

The pro-Brexit invitation to '*take back control*' appealed to many at a primitive as well as a rational level as a means of escaping the sense of powerlessness they have as a result of financial and job insecurity and the non-stop changes brought about by globalisation and digitalisation.

In the referendum, we were offered the fantasy of '*taking back control*' to assert our individuality as a way of escaping the non-linear complexities of group membership. The less able people were to tolerate complexity, the easier and less risky the choice seemed. Conversely, those people who perceived the choice to contain risk and complexity on both sides of the argument found themselves paralysed by indecision and uncertainty what to do for the best.

Some of those choosing Brexit may have been drawn to the simpler and clearer identity expressed through isolation; the idea of 'society' to which they may have felt the greatest sense of belonging may have resided in a small group rather than a large group, hence they saw themselves as (eg) Londoners first, then English, then British and only lastly European.

Some of those choosing to vote 'Remain' – especially the younger generation with their more fluid, emergent identities and more optimistic, internationalist outlook – may have been more attracted by ideals of peace, harmony and collaboration with their (European) neighbours and less concerned about the concentric circles of tribal allegiance.

Hypothesis 1:

Members of society were asked, in the referendum, to make a very complex decision that could not be calculated rationally.

They defended themselves against feelings of shame and inadequacy at not knowing the 'right' and 'wrong' answers by reaction formation: they convinced themselves that they were knowledgeable and decisive by ignoring the complexity and answering a simpler question instead (ie whether they wanted more control over their lives).

By choosing a fantasy of self-sufficiency, members of society are indulging in a delusion that they have no need for or responsibility to wider society, including strangers, foreigners, outsiders and 'others' of any kind.

Analysis 2: Strong feelings – anger, resentment and blame

We feel in genuine peril because a cornerstone of our identity is under threat. Our focus is on survival, not on understanding. This survival instinct drives both 'Remainers' and 'Brexiters', with both fearing the loss of what they feel is essential for survival. For the 'losers', it means being swamped with anger, frustration and grief and prevented from finding meaning.

The referendum forced us to abandon our previous (depressive) 'ambivalence' towards democracy. As individuals, we love the power it gives us when we are on the winning side and we hate the power it takes away from us when we are on the losing side. As a society, we love the power it gives us compared to being ruled by unelected, unaccountable and authoritarian leaders (such as the EU) and we hate the responsibility it gives us when our elected leaders pass difficult decisions onto us in referendums.

As a society, we are experiencing louder-than-ever expressions of anti-democratic feeling, such as the anti-Corbyn movement, the second referendum petition, the Scots and Northern Irish independence movements, and the manoeuvrings over Article 50 by politicians and lawyers who did not get the result they wanted.

We are in a split state, furiously projecting blame onto the 'other' to avoid acknowledging our personal responsibility for the situation in which we now find ourselves. We are disowning responsibility for things we would have faced up to before the vote.

We blame Brexit voters for imperilling the UK and the EU but recognise that some were vulnerable and exploited for political purposes, so we blame leaders for their lies, incoherence and incompetence.

We also harbour a sense of having been let down by male leaders, and by their macho, confrontational approach, and now look to

female leaders to look after us, make us feel better and heal our divisions.

There are lots of conspiracies about chaos being orchestrated by evil scheming politicians in Whitehall and Brussels. We are driven to explain everything we disapprove of by reference to the vote. We feel powerless to stop the feared fantasy version of our future and will need a long time to absorb and come to terms with it.

Hypothesis 2:

The referendum vote required members of society to make a binary choice between two positions each of which had good and bad aspects and each of which carried the risk of dangerous and damaging consequences.

Voting forced members of society into a primitive, binary state of mind that disowned the good elements of their rejected option and the bad elements of their chosen option and projected responsibility for their dangerous and damaging consequence onto suitable scapegoats.

In blaming various others for the outcome of the referendum, members of society are acting out their internal conflict and unconsciously contributing to the result they feared – namely, the fragmentation of society (through divisions between old and young people, within families, between friends, within political parties, between London and the regions, and between the countries within the United Kingdom).

Analysis 3: Threat to identity and existence

We feel unbearable, persecutory guilt for what we have done to ourselves and for the reputation and future of our country: for the loss of our idealised national identity as diplomats, statesmen and fair-minded people who can hold things (depressively) in balance; for our failure to explore the less binary aspects of our decision; and for our inattention to other tragedies such as Syria, Jo Cox MP and the Istanbul Airport massacre. As Oscar Wilde said: 'There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.'

In our search for rescue, we harbour a hope that the murdered MP Jo Cox, or the political demises of David Cameron or Jeremy Corbyn might be sacrificial lambs to propitiate the gods so that we can be delivered from the impending darkness and disaster we have wreaked on ourselves.

We want to find a way to cleanse ourselves of responsibility for the referendum result and its consequences, in the same way that we see

other 'guilty parties' – the politicians – washing their hands of responsibility for the result and for the downfall of their leaders. Like Pontius Pilate, we both crave a Messiah to deliver us and fear their emergence as an existential threat.

We are trapped between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, not understanding what has already happened or may be about to happen, and fearing that the sky is about to fall in.

Because we find sense-making impossible, we have retreated to a pre-verbal mode of thinking: using metaphors rather than words to give meaning and form to our experience.

Hypothesis 3:

Members of society experience guilt and fear about the possibility that they have (collectively) made a bad choice with damaging or destructive consequences for them personally, for their leaders and for society as a whole.

Members of society unconsciously defend themselves against this guilt and fear by pinning their hopes on the future – on new political leaders (and on the small print of legislation) that might deliver them from the adverse consequences of their democratic choices.

By investing hope in future deliverance, members of society are in a state of shock or paralysis, unable to face the practical realities of their present situation or think through the consequences of their desires either for society or for themselves.

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