



LISTENING POST

London at the Dawn of 2020

United Kingdom, London, January 8th

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES

After a long silence, the first contribution comes from a man who says he's been obsessed by politics for a year or more especially the last three months but I'm going to give it up for Lent! It's become an unhealthy obsession taking me away from personal things and the local community. I'm disappointed by the result but I'm getting over it. It is important to focus on family and the local community.

A woman says 'I have a sense of something similar but I've noticed all the films being screened and talked about are all about individuals' lives struggling with personal dilemmas, inward-looking – 'A flight to the personal'. Even politicians are looking inwards, internally, into their own parties. Something about shutting the world out – is it psychotic? What is going on socially, social movements – all colours but the same shapes...

A man refers to looking to the BBC for hope. Hearing a programme on the 2nd January with John Sopell examining the 'voice of the nation' – a discussion about the use of the male pronoun in relation to the term 'expert'; the alleged rape of a female tourist in Cyprus and the news would damage the island's economy if holiday makers decide to boycott the island, following doubts about the judicial system there; finally, Pope Francis being 'smacked down', and questions whether the BBC is biased and misreporting...

A woman spoke of going to Paris on 27th January during the Metro strikes, where it seemed very calm. With only two tube lines working, there was an unusual number of people walking in the streets... It was perhaps a better way to experience the city, but maybe the Gilet Jaunes didn't need to be there because 'disruption' had already been provided by the strikes.

A woman spoke of a bizarre experience of waking up from sleep and being unable to orientate herself, her mind bombarded by one thing after another, then hearing on the radio of two people snowballing and being shot at by an American guy. It's like waking up with a terrible hangover but without alcohol.

A mother spoke of recently seeing her 17 year old eldest son who had seen the film 'JoJo Rabbit' and had found it 'surprisingly uplifting and hopeful' – a film about Hitler youth, World War II, the holocaust. He then unexpectedly asked her about his grandfather who had left Poland at the age of 17 in search of a better life. As a rebellious teenager he had gone in hope to Palestine. 'I'm now in awe of my 17 year old son and the possibilities for him ...rather than being depressed about the next decade, which is not the decade I had thought we would be having, but maybe there's possibilities for him. Maybe my son will enter this decade with, not depression, but possibilities. I hope he sees it as inspiring.'

A young man spoke of being 'pre-occupied by the climate crisis' and learning of the term 'OK Boomer!' [*a term, experienced as derogatory, used to dismiss attitudes stereotypically attributed to the 'baby boomer' generation*]. He speaks of a breakdown between the generations. 'It's difficult for me. I don't feel optimistic about the future, but I have to keep going...' [*supporting the climate activists*]

An older man says his pre-occupation is with 'community' having volunteered for two days and two nights at a refuge over Christmas. There was hardly anyone on the streets on Christmas Eve except the people who usually 'inhabit' the streets. 'I'm hoping for the (re)generation of 'community' in the future, the necessity for it – hoping for more openness to 'community'....

LONG SILENCE

A woman says she's trying to bridge the gap between the personal and the wider world (*society?*). Responding to the earlier woman who referred to her family's immigrant history spoke of her father leaving Mesopotamia 'for a better life' – now looking at Iran and Trump – everything is 'up in the air' – wondering how it's all going to fall – very aware of putting everything negative 'out there' when everything's fine in here (*internally?*).

An older man speaks of his dismay about the amount of hatred that can be evoked via social media such as Twitter also of the anxiety about possible reactions to displaying a Labour Party poster in his home window and the possible anti-semitic message it might give to a family of Israeli tenants who are new neighbours. It's so easy to give offence and be misunderstood nowadays. Going to the trouble of delivering a goodwill New Year's card produced an immediate visit of thanks from the neighbours and a long and interesting conversation about international matters. Nonetheless, it feels like a 'dangerous world'.

A woman who had spoken earlier of films focusing on 'individual pre-occupations' spoke of a noisy young family during the summer in Glasgow having to remind herself that these children are 'the future'. But also of the loss of resilience in young people as featured in a Woman's Hour programme, about a child's computer pinging to remind them of their homework and of the parent's concern that their child will do well in the world...

A woman with two sons aged 29 and 27 spoke of the former struggling but the latter doing better. She recalled struggling at that age. She also referred to a

particular street in a local community in East London where the residents set up a WhatsApp group exclusively for that street, which brought some positives but also seemed to become unwieldy and pre-occupied with suspicions about things seen in the street, becoming like a Neighbour Watch scheme.

A man responded to this by referring to his own residential street in 'the most polluted city in the country', where there are problems with parking due to families owning more than one car whilst living in houses with no garage. An anonymous leaflet about the local council's proposed parking charges was posted through the door, saying 'they will charge a lot if you have a third or fourth car!' This provoked a strong reaction: 'I think this is mad because in 10 years we won't be able to drive petrol cars [and] we're going to have more and more arguments about it!' The same man also spoke of the 'hopeless cause' of opening up the local Methodist Church to visitors in a highly Islamic area – 'several mosques within a few hundred yards of each other'. It may be a hopeless cause to try and bring the 'community' together. 'I don't know how to make things change. I see the need for change but I'm not sure I know where to stand.'

A woman interjects – 'It makes me think of the last election. It's the loss of the interpersonal in many ways – becoming 'a caring free zone?'

A counter response to the above came from a man advocating activities with 'interfaith groups' – 'a good area to engage people'. But another referred to the fear of someone coming to the door [*evangelising*] – Jehovah's Witnesses – even after having explained that she was not interested. 'But they keep on coming...'

'They're only witnessing' – he replied [*apparently challenging the prejudice or redefining the term*]

'We don't trust other people's motives...' someone added.

'This thing about neighbourliness, it's not very simple at all. Are people living in cars and vans 'neighbours?'' [*reference to those only seen going to work?*]
'Or do you have to own a property to be considered a neighbour?' [*reference to tenants?*]

'There's a problem with the climate movement coming across as 'evangelical' – how do we change the world when people do not appear to be listening? Is there a limit to the didactic approach? Do we need to work on a better environment to facilitate the changes that are needed? It's not so simple as telling people what they need to do. We have the solutions.'

A woman responds: 'I have a problem with this 'changing the world' – there is no single solution.' A man agrees, 'It's systemic.'

A young woman says she's downloaded an App that reminds her three times a day that she's going to die that paradoxically makes her aware of being alive but that by being alive it's scary because of 'natural selection'. 'If I live I'm surviving as one of the fittest – then feeling guilty because I'm not rebelling

as much as I should – being alive is much harder than being dead! Paying the mortgage, keeping the job, not upsetting people stops you taking action.'

Martyrs for a cause? Individualism.....?

A man referred to walking from Victoria and spending all his time stepping to one side or the other to avoid people on their phones bumping into him. 'I've got a Harry Potter scar on my forehead (*pointing to it*) after walking into a lamp post whilst playing with my phone! 'I have now committed a millennial mistake – my stock has risen due to my own stupidity.'

A brief reference to Trump and Johnson – 'the more stupid they act the more popular they become!'

A man suggests that we're a sort of [*self selected*] community here, 'but we're all white as far as I can see.' A woman interjects – 'Apart from me! But you can't see me!' [*on account of her seating position*]

The man continues: 'Somehow or another, we're a part of choosing this. We're talking about divisions, awareness of each other, but for the main part this particular community is not mixed...'

Another man adds, 'It's difficult to broach this subject because people can easily feel overlooked.' Returning to a comment made earlier, the comment about the movies, 'I had an association to the awards ceremony [*Golden Globes*] in which it was commented how all of the nominations appeared to be white.' Feelings of guilt around letting the comment pass.

'Feels like we're going forward to the past – is this the decade of remodelling but it's just not started yet?' I need to be able to see the familiar differently'.

One man, who had not previously commented referred to the 'forelock tugging, working class Tories up North'

'That's quite a description!' someone interjected....

'It's a caricature, but there are divisions ... working class Tory voters particularly in the North East and [*contrasted with*] young people from university towns and metropolitan types – it's a bit back to front at the moment.'

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this part the larger group split into three smaller groups for 30 minutes before reconvening to share suggested themes. A flipchart was used to collect suggestions which included various paradoxes, contradictions or dichotomies:

- the individual vs the 'collective' and the relationship between the two (*?possible/impossible?*),
- hope (*tentatively expressed*) vs despair,
- pride vs shame,
- life vs death,

- 'real' vs 'unreal' (*the search for euphoria*),
- authentic vs inauthentic,
- action for change vs inaction (*impotence?*),
- inclusion vs exclusion,
- evangelism ('*They're trying to convert me!*') vs 'witnessing' (e.g. *Jehovah's Witnesses*),
- social engagement (*I'm not doing what I should – e.g. being 'politically active', guilt*) vs impersonal distancing (*finding, maintaining privacy/personal safety – 'flight to the personal'*),
- ambivalence vs acceptance of/coping with ambiguity
- younger generation vs older generation

Also:

- Complexity generates different points of view which may be impossible to reconcile and perpetuates splits within society.
- The mistrust of dogma – organised religions and politicians.
- Anxiety regarding social norms (*unaccountable social media comments*), giving offence and offending.
- Honouring the 'ordinary'.
- Despair can manifest itself in delinquency.

PART 3: ANALYSIS & HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In initially considering the above it was observed that, possibly because of the binary nature of modern technology, which increasingly dominates our lives, we live in a world riven with false dichotomies and oversimplified choice which we find ourselves perpetuating but with which we are instinctively – consciously and unconsciously – uncomfortable. The same technology has also 'complexified reality' making it more difficult to deal with.

It is a world in which there is fake truth in which the media are complicit and often biased, an attack on authenticity and no accountability for leaders who lie and gain power. We have become confused, suspicious and mistrustful even of one another and inevitably ambivalent about our roles in society.

Yet the simplification of the increasingly complex world, exploited by politicians, is attractive and probably accounts in part for the ideological swings in politics we have witnessed recently. Nevertheless we suspect that there is more to it than that and there is a feeling that we should 'lift the veil on politics' and see behind it to explore and understand the social dynamics better. It was suggested, in discussion, that maybe we need more 'training'.

There is a manifest existential anxiety demonstrated by the preoccupations and experiences of members expressed above – not surprising given the climate crisis articulated politically by 'The Extinction Rebellion' movement. Global changes in political and geographical boundaries are huge; there seem to be no fixed points of reference. As a group, in parts, we have demonstrated a very 'schizoid', regressed, even 'borderline' state of mind (e.g. *the use of neologisms*) which is paralysing and makes it very difficult to stand back and generate much more than descriptive hypotheses. But it is also deeply disturbing if it is truly a reflection of our society at large.

As a species, whether we acknowledge it generally or not, we have profound anxiety about survival and this inevitably becomes manifest in various ways at the individual level. Is it a question of 'survival of the fittest'? Consciously we can articulate that we will, can, only survive if we work together but we are mistrustful of politicians and damaging institutions that we have formerly looked to for answers and our imagined 'solutions' have been compromised by unexpected political change.

We were born into community but as it changes around us we are finding it difficult to adapt. We talk about the need to 'come together' in the 'community' but even the latter presents us with definitional dilemmas. 'Are we going to survive selfishly or by working together?'

Hypothesis A

As we enter a new decade we have become more aware than ever that we live in a world which is difficult to comprehend. Because of our experience of the news, mistrust in the media and politicians we face a constant challenge to discern what is true and what is a lie. In a society which is changing around us we have become confused, suspicious and mistrustful of each other and ambivalent about our membership. We are, as always, faced with a choice to psychologically disengage to protect ourselves or stay engaged in the hope of sustaining, and maybe influencing, a transformed society which brings together the personal, the relational and the 'collective'.

Hypothesis B

Because the main boundaries which previously defined our national identity, and also our understanding of society, have been compromised or lost through deep political splitting (e.g. Brexit), we have become aware of the divisive processes of inclusion and exclusion, of fragmentation, and the prospect of isolation. Our experience of a society of increasing complexity leads us to search for and revisit the term 'community' and what it means. Whilst we understand what it means to be part of a family or tribe we are longing for something we can identify with and belong to at a societal level, a better container in part reality, in part phantasy.

Hypothesis C

Because we are told we face an environmental crisis as a species, which arouses profound existential anxiety, we have to choose between denial and acceptance. Either way we find that our internal world, the compass by which we have to navigate the new complexities of the external world, and where we hold a coherent sense of our own identity in the social world, is compromised by the enormity of this challenge: it may not be 'up to the job'. Feeling overwhelmed by our feelings, unsure how to engage actively within society and abandoned by organisations and politicians we cannot trust we are in touch with the risk of an isolating 'borderline state of mind' which is paralysing.

Roger Ramsden: January 17th 2020