"Britain and the World Autumn 2003"
Report of a Listening Post held on Wednesday 29th October 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 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 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. On this occasion, themes can be drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

(a) *Insecurity & Inequity*.
There were strong feelings that people were being excluded in all manner of ways. There were those who were seen (from various perspectives) to 'have' and those who did not 'have'. For example, a breast cancer charity was known to be freely spending vast sums of money on 'quality of life' issues -non essentials - while others did not even get treatment. A concern about people being in receipt of unearned and undeserved money; be that through the Government Social Service system, or Burrell for his book. It was very much considered to be those that shouted loudest, celebrities, or those who were in the know, who got and the rest who did not get. There was no equity across society. Allied to this, there were also strong fears of insecurity: of being overrun, of being helpless, of there being no freedom, of 'the mighty and I'.

(b) *Lack of Accountability in Institutional Leadership*.
It was felt that the 'mighty cannot be held accountable'. That there was a lack of responsibility and accountability in all manner of situations ranging from the more local issues such as police not responding to community needs, the postal system not working, and children in care 'slipping between the cracks'; to the Rule of Law, morality and immorality, the political system, and central government. The question was asked, 'who can you hold accountable'. And this question was deliberately distinguished from a more general and less effective question, 'who can you blame'.

(c) *Change - living with failing past and scary future*.
There was a feeling that the 'old' systems were largely crumbling and were not suitable for current use. For example, old values were now seen to be largely redundant, many

of the services that we valued in the past were now being questioned. The Royal Family was seen to be without support from or not receiving the authority of large numbers of the population. It was not clear whether central authority was good or bad. What seemed clear was that there was a feeling that power was being abused - their was a malevolent use of power. Somewhere in this mix was considerable concern about the role of the media. Allied to this was the growing realisation that new systems were scary and brought their own problems. For example, the use of mobile phones by drug dealers to constantly change location for drug dealing thus avoiding police surveillance.

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. Again, there was a lack of clear, easily identifiable issues but there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

Analysis: The analysis commenced with an attempt to understand why we were feeling so insecure and why we were so concerned about issues of inequality. It may be interesting and relevant that as the analysis developed there was considerable anger generated within the membership. There was concern about what 'others' were doing to us. A denial that we had any part in this process - it was 'the authorities' fault. There was a libidinal thrill in setting 'the other' up as a bad object that we could project all our venom and hatred into. At the same time it seemed quite inappropriate and crazy. It was appreciated that such was the anxiety experienced by society that this splitting was a means of denial. Nevertheless, the 'hum drum' existence was disliked immensely. We then linked these strong feelings of insecurity and inequality to the notion of change and the subsequent loss arising therefrom. That being particularly so in regard to values and other good internal objects that we have all used in the past. Now, many of these good objects are seen to be falling apart, disregarded or not valued, consequently, they are no longer available to us. We are deprived of our dependency on them and thus feel badly treated.

Hypothesis: Change, Loss, Insecurity and Inequality. The rapidity and multi-faceted nature of change occurring in society results in the loss of many loved and familiar objects, which we have previously been highly dependent on. The removal of these loved good objects leaves us feeling both insecure and with a sense of inequality.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The analysis then developed in an unexpected manner with the members considering why we had not referred to major issues such as Blair and his illness, the failure of the Northern Ireland peace process, and particularly, the continuing war in Iraq. It was felt to be highly significant that these issues had not been referred to and we worked at trying to understand what this meant in terms of societal processes. It seemed clear that this matter was linked to the major theme concerning a 'Lack of Accountability in Institutional Leadership'. It was seen to be connected to the notion that 'the mighty cannot be held accountable', this was responded to with subsequent feeling of helplessness and then followed by a denial of the very existence of the issues. 'I can't do anything about it so I'm going to forget it'. When, however, we started to get past our denials, strong emotions were experienced in the group. Feelings that (to (mis)quote Yeats), 'Blair falls apart, the centre cannot hold', feelings of anger which we referred to as 'the massacre of the powerful'. Feelings of triumph that Blair might be suffering. A gleeful, malicious feeling of 'wouldn't it be good if they all fell down'. This led to an understanding of what might be being denied. It was felt that the continual atrocities were unbearable and allied to a sense of helplessness and not being able to hold people accountable, led to a manic defence against all the anxiety concerning these issues. Rather than feel this way it was felt better to go into denial.

Hypothesis: Lack of Accountability, Helplessness, and Denial. Many of the current events in Britain and the World, generate such high levels of anxiety that they are experienced as unbearable. A societal response is one of considerable anger aimed at those in positions of authority. However, the perceived lack of accountability in institutional leaders results in feelings of helplessness which is subsequently dealt with by denial of these experiences.

Convener: Dr Lionel F Stapley