**"Britain and the World
Autumn 2004"**
**Report of a Listening Post held on
Wednesday 6th October 2004
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 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. On this occasion, themes can be drawn together as the following three inter-related statements:

a) *Counting the costs of defences against risk from 'outside forces'.*
This was a theme that opened the Listening post, with a member relating an experience, as a resident in a gated community, wherein the electronic gate controlling the entry system had malfunctioned, triggering extreme fear in the resident's association about anticipated break- ins. The member expressly did not share the group reaction and as such, was seen by other residents as obstructive; subsequently finding herself left with the projected fear and confusion as to the degree of external threat, reflected 'in the mind' of the residents' group. The Listening Post referred also to the rising pre-occupation with risk in everyday workplace experiences, for example, the considerable energies invested in the health service on resilience measures, as if to equip the workforce to deal with all adverse circumstances; or the demand upon medical research teams from patients taking part in random trials, to be part of the control group, as if in the hope of finding the ultimate treatment to eliminate terminal illness. There was concern that a prevailing emphasis on measurable, mechanical systems of control against risk and 'paper' accountability undermined the take up of personal/professional accountability for decision-making. The illustration given was of an Inspectorate visit to an educational/childcare setting, in which a session involving the children in the preparation and cooking of food was observed. Instead of recognising the therapeutic context of the activity, and the accountability for safety that properly rested with the professional in charge of the children, the inspectors had operated a 'tick sheet' risk assessment. Members felt that a learning environment of necessity includes elements of risk-taking and uncertainty, if it is to support intelligent development of life skills.

b) *Accountability and Authority*
There was discussion about the degree of opportunity and inclination for citizens to demonstrate accountability in relation to the group, whether in the local neighbourhood, workplace, or the wider societal and global environments. There was in particular, a sense of dis-ease in society, of impotence to act, of trouble, upsets and vulnerability, in the context of frequent eruptions of violence on both a community and global scale. The horror of the murders of young children in Beslan was referred to. References were made on a more individual, personal level 'nearer to home', of un-contained and violent 'madness' in local communities. In one example, the authority of a police officer had offered a containing, temporary safety for the individual, but there was little evidence for hopefulness in the Listening Post, of finding equivalent containing authorities on a global level. Instead members expressed an increased awareness and unease with avoidance of authority [G8, and the failure of foreign governments to take a stand in the Sudan], failing authority positions [the UN] and of abuses of power. There was an over-riding sense that no one was taking authority, or being held accountable.

c) *Living in the Twilight Zone: Uncertainty, Hopelessness, Indifference and Abdication*
This theme linked closely with theme b) above. There were references made to the emotional costs of living in a heightened state of alert in an unstable, fear-driven world where risk and danger is continually paraded, and engaging with difference is avoided. Members recognised anger resulting from individuals' feelings of impotence to create a more benign climate. Anger however was seen to have no channels for expression. One member described the position as living in the 'twilight zone'; 'we don't like it, we don't agree with it and we don't know what to do about it'. Other members spoke of a sense of apathy, a 'do I really care?' at a local level, when attempts are made to involve individuals in decision-making, about potential changes to the community [traffic calming methods]- or in the workplace, [encouraging staff to take up ownership for change]. There was a sense that groups, institutions and the wider society are losing recognisable shape. The defensive reaction was, as one member put it, 'to get the best deal for me'. This provoked the question: Is it possible for people to develop skills to negotiate life, for both self and collective interests?

**Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

In this part of the Listening Post, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively trying to identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at this time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the participants 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. This analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses.

**Analysis and Hypothesis 1**

*Analysis: Anxiety about the breakdown of society: life giving and death dealing forces.*
In this Listening Post, thoughts turned to the impact of the speed and intensity of change in the current world environment. On the one hand, rapid advances in medical technology invited omnipotent fantasies of healthier, longer lives or indeed immortality; the internet revolution offered promise for limitless channels of communication and information, together with the potential for the breaking down of old territorial

boundaries. On the other hand, the world was experienced as changing more rapidly than as citizens we can keep pace with. The ephemeral nature of new developments, rapidly invented and as rapidly rendered obsolete, has given way to fears of madness and absence of control. Human life it seemed on a mass scale was subject to the same process, with 'ethnic cleansing' around the world [the situation in the Sudan being seen as a 're-run' of the Balkans]. This brought a sense of impotence to intervene in any way that would bring control to the 'madness'. There was a wish for a clear leader to come to the rescue -one member reflected on the absence of God, and another on the demise of the royal family as a benign figurehead. Once Blair had taken on the projections of competence from the electorate as the hoped for ideal leader, the 'monster' was then created, which made protest and criticism ineffectual.

*Hypothesis:* Change is occurring at a pace that is experienced as too rapid, so threatens the continued stability of society, at community and global levels. The absence of 'space to think' has created unconscious [psychotic] anxieties about the breakdown of society. In response, people have abdicated personal authority and seek instead a benign leader who will look after our survival needs [basic assumption dependency]. Leaders selected on the basis of such idealised wishes, inevitably fall short of the task and instead are experienced as 'death-dealing'.

**Analysis and Hypothesis 2**

*Analysis: Leadership by stealth.*
Earlier discussion extended to reveal a continuing distrust of political leaders [Bush and Blair] and scepticism about the 'trust me, I am right' absolutes of decisions taken on behalf of the electorate. The government was seen to have lost the capacity to think or engage in any dialogue about its internal or foreign policies; instead members felt it acted on the basis of partial fact, without due process of information-gathering or honest consultation. This was described as power by stealth, with references being made to the war on Iraq in this respect. In terms of UK policy, members referred to the way in which policing had been used for political agendas, evidencing governmental influences on the deployment of police to reduce street mugging figures- to give the public a [wished for] illusion of protection on personal security - and the placing of local controls on motorways - to give the illusion of safety controls. The privatisation of the health service was seen as further illustration of a government making policies primarily in the interest of self-survival, rather than risking engagement with the diversity of public opinion, which might reveal the reality that not everybody could be satisfied.

*Hypothesis:* Because of uncertainty arising from global dynamics and the global revolution, it is impossible to know with any certainty what is going on; there is no 'right' response when faced with complexity. At the same time, politicians and policy makers are forced to act, as people put projections of competence into them, thereby rendering themselves infantilised and impotent. Leaders, who take on the projected expectations of omnipotence and omniscience in the paranoid schizoid position, fail to go through the proper process of honest consultation, instead taking the path of power by stealth. This results in a distrust of current leaders.

**Analysis and Hypothesis 3:**

*Analysis: 'Catch all policies': defending against uncertainty in a changing world.*
Members' experience as citizens pointed to a corrosive imbalance; in that the liberating/ creative elements inherent in states of uncertainty [creative chaos] are now being overshadowed by a fundamental fear of risk. Externalised risk in the shape of threats to the boundary around the individual/group had been observed in both local and world dimensions and as a threat that is both physical [the gated community, Beslan, fears of ovarian cancer and infertility], psychological [the undermining of professional authority and therapeutic development] and social [the neighbour from 'hell']. The fear of vulnerability from violent attack, madness and intrusion had become embedded, so that the fear itself was the destructive force threatening the sense of self-efficacy. The reality of violent events and fights over territory on both global and local levels has generated fears about how difference across boundaries will be regulated.

Reference was made to the UK where the rapid movement and change in communities, has brought increasing diversity of religions, belief systems and range in social mores and anxiety about the locus of leadership, to maintain social stability. Hence people press the government to act, to give clear guidance about acceptable / unacceptable societal behaviours and values. Reference was made to social care workers in this context and the difficult challenge of regulating standards of care in a society with diverse norms and beliefs. The government, finding the task impossible to legislate for complexity and change, has created instead a catch-all-fail-safe policy. Accountability for the operation of policy [and the complexity therein] is then passed to regulatory bodies, with the resultant frustration within social care practice about the failings of tick box measures of assessment. Hence the feelings of insecurity and impotence generated by a rapidly changing, diverse society, are reflected in the upsurge in concrete measures against risk [resilience measures, formalised risk assessment procedures] to create the illusion of control.

*Hypothesis:* The predominant state of a fast moving, diverse society on both local and global dimensions, is resulting in a proliferation of catchall measures of accountability by politicians and institutions, in defence against risk associated with uncertainty. These are not only gate-keeping the boundaries against risk but also lock out creative potential: the capacity for thought and deliberation, the toleration of difference and exploration in the face of change. This is seen as an abuse of authority by the Government appointed Regulators and Inspectors, who ignore the formal authority of the managers they are regulating or inspecting.

Convenor

Christine Cave