"Britain and the World Autumn 2006"
Report of a Autumn Listening Post
held on Wednesday 11th October
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm
at Connaught Hall
University of London
Tavistock Square
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 Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Several themes were identified by the members and these have been distilled into three major themes as below.

The discussion during Part 1, had begun with the idea of being in an 'acute phase'. In particular the transition of young people leaving the nest - symbolically giving rise to questions of what is obsolete, what needs to be let go of and what needs to be mourned, in order to make way for new opportunities. This transition bringing with it familiar fears that there will not be enough room for everyone and some will not find a place. The following discussion of further pre-occupations covered the thought of individual's unrealistic expectations, issues of complexity, deprivation, affluence, fear, despondency, the increase of security, impact of youth, feeling safe or not, the experience of a very controlling political system bringing with it an alternate sense of hiding behind confusion, obfuscation - this generated the idea of actively creating false threats to bring about the illusion of needing to protect society from something that is not there. The idea that this is a perversion of truth that leaves people in a territory where the fears being given credence are somewhat illusory - potentially engendering a quasi-psychotic state of mind. The discussion was distilled into three major themes as follows:

Theme 1: Chaos, complexity and control
The relationship of being in chaos was contrasted with a fear of creativity, leading to attempts to over-control. The discussion moved between the relationship of chaos and control; complexity and control; and chaos/confusion and complexity. The difficulties

managing complexity seem to be associated with opting out or falling into confusion. It was felt that there was confusion particularly in the area of leadership. Also a pressure to assert control over the speed of change in a rapidly changing society. Over-control increasingly present.

Theme 2: Awareness of vulnerability and problems of security generating fear, with external threats affecting capacity for intimacy and local concern
Thoughts about the escalation of fears in ordinary life, for example, fear of knife culture, fear of speaking to the young, fear on the streets and buses - if people shout, have music loud, etc. bugs in wheelie bins. There was a feeling of 'live today and damn tomorrow' as well as a 'right's issue linked to the feeling of unrealistic expectations - possibly a reminder of the policeman who asked not to be placed outside the Israeli embassy for personal reasons. Will nurses say who they can/cannot treat? These thoughts leading to real fears of rejection and awareness of neediness. There were reminders of the ring of steel and armed police at Labour Party conference and this was then connected to the thought that in fact fewer are at risk than when the IRA were active or during the second world war. Perhaps problems are less definable now than they were previously - and in the absence of an external object to project anxiety onto, false threats may get created by government to give the impression of real definable threats, leading to paranoia and fear. If pervaded by fear, we are more inclined to press the panic button. Real threats (global warming) are overlooked. This attitude draws in paranoia, a perversion of reality and a psychotic way of responding. It is convenient to have a terrorist threat as it leads to a cop-out from ordinary inter-action. The pre-occupation with external threats draw attention away from local concerns therefore threatens intimacy. Here there was an awareness of the possible circularity that is present.

Theme 3: Things are not what they seem
There was a sense of a change in attitude of the have's and have-not's. Buzz and creativity in areas of deprivation. Some uncertainty, ennui in areas of affluence - despondency of the privileged students in exceptional universities. Senior executives close to burn out. When is it reasonable to limit what is available? The young (under 30's) want something to own - in concrete and symbolic terms. Conservatives as the new liberals, Lord Chief Justice more open to change than the government. Paying bonuses to those injured on the front line and use of police cells for overcrowding in prisons. Fear of unknown: two aspects to this - one that cites the possible objects of fear, for example 'difference', 'future', 'deprivation' and a second that is closer to the literal 'not knowing' of the unknown.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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. The following hypotheses were those that emerged in the Listening Post.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:
There was an idea that pre-occupation with the 'external', for example uncertainty in the world, has brought about an avoidance of those concerns that are closer to home - for example, intimacy, the local and personal. There was a question of the role of shame in this - perhaps from the squandering of resources and potential. There was a recognition of a circular process in which there are projections onto external events (dis-satisfaction with government, concern about terrorism) which depletes personal agency and confidence, and in turn supports anxieties about what is going on externally. There was also a subtext of 'loss' with its various associations to the process of change in society (children leaving the nest and scope for new opportunities means re-evaluating and giving up pre-existing ways of being) and 'fear of the dark' as an expression of fear of the unknown and a sense of vulnerability. There was a sense that in the face of unpredictable changes and somewhat indefinable threats, government had taken up a more rigid and concrete way of exerting its authority and power. There was a recognition that this can only happen with the covert agreement of members of society.

Hypothesis:
Because of a sense of indefinable vulnerability which leaves members of society fearful and impotent we are happy to allow control to reside with government.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:
It was also thought that the current pre-occupation with the veil for Islamic women may have a symbolic relevance to fear of what goes on behind the veil, somehow leaving women, mothers, creativity as occupying a position in society of being threatening - a reversal of traditional roles. Perhaps linked to a comment on the importance of the bodily/visceral aspects of vulnerability, the importance of boundaries was noted and there was a suggestion that there was a fear of the move from fantasy to enactment in society at the moment. It was also noted that there seemed to be a loss of a capacity for mirroring (perhaps linked to the idea of an attack on women's creativity - see above). The idea of human annihilation was personalised in vulnerability, but also linked to the threat to a way of life. There was also a reminder of the murder of Anna Politkovskaya - possibly a reminder of an attack on traditionally more vulnerable/weaker groups - women, the young, ethnic minority groups? There was a feeling that we are struggling to live with impotence and the response to this is turning a blind eye, a cover up, an attempt to displace fear and anger. The role of perverse processes was introduced, both in terms of the possibility of government introducing false threats which anxiety can be generated towards and also linked to the experience of Iraq, the idea of bringing democracy at the point of a gun. There was increasing feeling that there were psychotic and perverse processes at play, psychotic referring to an inversion of reality; and perversion to processes that are against development and/or deliberately designed to mislead.

Hypothesis:
Because the prospect of chaos and human annihilation (threat to a way of life) are too difficult to face, individuals and society turn away from trying to bear the complexity and uncertainty, turning a blind eye to some of what is going on in society and as a way of coping with feeling out of control are creating false problems to which we have no solutions as a defence.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis:
The discussion re-membered that some of the themes in Part 1 had noted the creativity that was emerging out of impoverishment and marginalisation in some quarters, for example, Newham. There was a recognition that the needs of the young and of people immigrating into the UK, etc brought with it both fear and envy. It was noted that more governments are electing women as heads of state, changing the order of things and perhaps bringing with it the fear that "women are men in disguise" (or that they threaten traditional roles and positions, ways of doing things). One comment was that 'it would be nice to have a government that could face uncertainty and talk about it'. This third stage brought back a number of key feelings. The idea of Unconscious collusion, to avoid feelings of shame, guilt, envy and enviability. Also, quite powerfully the sense of the 'other' and the question of whether the frightening, uncivilised 'barbarians' (e.g. young people, gangs) were an opportunity for creativity or a threat to security. There was a feeling of a circular movement between these two positions which was symbolically represented by who was sitting on the bench - young or old.

Hypothesis:
Because a new order, a new way of conducting society is developing beneath the surface (linked to immigration, the impact of youth culture and the changing role of women), we as a society are feeling vulnerable and are moving to create confusion and false problems (that inevitably have no solution) to hide the real direction of feelings of threat and vulnerability.