**"Britain and the World
at Autumn 2007"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on Wednesday 10th 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 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 organizations, or as members of families and communities. What might be called the 'social' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In this Part participants collectively identified the major themes emerging from Part 1. On this occasion there were three themes, as follows:

Theme 1: Social Aggression
Members were particularly pre-occupied with and provided many experiences, some which follow, of social aggression. The experience was that social aggression was an outlet for underlying frustration and fragmentation of self. It occurred at the boundary of self and others. It was linked to the issue of loss of identity and members asked whether we gained an identity through creating a drama. A further thought was to link the frustration to a struggle to accept imperfection. A member spoke of being on the train where a group of women were talking; one said she had flown to New Zealand premium fair. He felt like saying to her - what do you think you are doing? But on the other hand he realised that he will soon have a third child and thought a bigger car would be great. He spoke of recent news that global warming may not be reversible and said that he was frightened for himself but more so for his children. He also related two disturbing phone calls at work, which he experienced as a tirade - 'you and your colleagues are fucking wankers', the experience was very threatening and he felt it was a fearful world. Another member spoke of an experience earlier in the evening. He explained how he had waited for a man and woman with a young child and a baby in pram to get on bus, when another woman forced her way past exclaiming angrily that she had been waiting for half an hour. The man with children said he'd been waiting longer. They both got on the bus arguing very aggressively. Out of this act of kindness it was feared that he had instigated a fight. A member commented that, all seemed to be on a very short fuse and others added that it's certainly not like the 60's or 70's or even the 80's. Another member explained that he had an entry phone and having let his children in they come up a flight of stairs and for a short while are out of sight. He is always concerned for their safety and recently one of the children was delayed and he got really worried - saying, this is a difficult world. Another member talked to his

experience of driving his car. He explained that he nearly always stops to let the bus go; recently he did so and got beeped at from behind - constant aggression. Others joined that this affects the way we treat each other.

One member thought that they were fighting for the kindness; adding, its not there often. Another member related his experience of a woman who sat next to him on a bus and applied some perfume it was very nice. He regretted not telling the woman it was so nice. He felt it might have made a difference. Another member related how she was also on a bus and a foreign girl came and sat next to her, she seemed pleased to have the opportunity to engage with someone, to make contact. A member felt that the fighting is a wish to connect. It was also felt that aggression can be seen as envy for something. This was connected to the woman who had a go because someone else was let on the bus; she was seen as losing something. A member inspired by the talk of buses recalled that there is an increase of bed bugs in London and its being spread on buses. Another member referred to his experience of stopping driving to work because of so much aggression in driving. He then acknowledged that he was very aggressive when riding his bike. He continued relating an experience where he got into an altercation - he acknowledged that he does it and hates it in others. The reason he does it is because his pride is hurt. Another member explained his experience of driving and explained that where he travels, the road merges from 2 - 3 lanes; if others ask he lets them through - if not, his view is 'sod them - am I going to lose 20 seconds of my life'. Another member spoke of being in a similar position where a woman asked to be let in. Having let her in she failed to acknowledge his good gesture - so he screamed obscenities at her. It seems that you flip from one stage to the other. You make an assessment that if there is no danger to yourself you go on and act aggressively. If there is potential danger you don't go on.

A member spoke of a whole lot of things going on in his head, a steam of aggression that he was struggling with. He didn't see himself as aggressive; awkward or difficult maybe but aggressive no. He continued, somehow the way that David Cameron taunted Gordon Brown as a loser being ridiculed etc was not what he had hoped for after Blair left. Brown seemed an attempt to reduce complexity of identity. But somewhere it seems that the competitive thing - the way politicians get involved has affected him. It was not typical Brown but he fell into a heap. Another member made the link that whichever society we talk about it seems we like drama and theatre. Another took the view that whether imagined or real, knife attacks and gun attacks happen. Aggression and competition is a major factor around us - there is a need to be top dog. Another felt aggression was linked to trying to be perfect and aggression comes from not being able to be. A member related to her experience of a fear that we are losing our humanity. She had spent six hours on the internet dealing with a problem. In that time she had tried to inject herself into the process but could not affect what seemed a mechanistic process delivered by non-human beings. The system had wiped out any experience of humanity. She asked, 'How far do we go and still remain human, or do we all become robotic creatures?'

Theme 2: Loss of Identity
Members were also preoccupied with a loss of identity, which was coupled to feelings of insecurity. Members expressed their experiences of being in transition and of difficulty in knowing what reference points they have. Their experience was of loss of identity at both a personal and national level. This led to a search for identity at various levels and in various situations. The Listening Post opened with a member speaking to his experience of taking a new role as grandfather to Sophie, a bundle of joy, a nice

experience. Another member joined saying 'yes it's good and you can give them back can't you'. The same member related to her experience of reading the Evening Standard where a man went to Camden on a Sunday. He parked his car, which was towed away. He then walked to the car pound a quarter of a mile away. He showed his car key as identity, but they insisted on other written identity. He subsequently had to go home to Worthing and return which took 10 hours. She said it had made her think about identity and continued by asking 'what's my identity now that I'm retired'. There was a discussion about the mother of Madeleine, who was seen as a strong woman who was now under stress after events in Portugal. Her identity had been blown away by suspicion. Could a professional woman do this? Another member said that who you are is an issue of identity. He referred to his experience of being blown away from his identity as a labour supporter. He explained, how quickly we respond to surface events. He had great hope in Gordon Brown after the Blair years, and felt that he would take a measured course, and not be influenced by spin, he felt he was someone with the courage to withstand pressures: to deal with hard questions in a measured way. Then he shoots himself in the foot, it seems he couldn't tolerate 'ordinariness', he had to get excited by election fever. Another member joined to say it was a bit like the McCanns we've got to be titillated by drama. Another member said this struck a nerve. My experience, how I'm feeling, resonates with what you say. I constantly act to find an identity. It's the same as 30 - 40 years ago. My enforced departure from a previous identity left me confused. I was faced with the loss of people and places. He spoke to Peter Marris's book 'Loss and change'; and continued, I suppose I need to grieve for the loss of those persons but don't seem to have the language to do it. I do lots of things to give me an identity, looking up lots of old friends. All through my life in England I have been doing that. He explained that he had no reference to his previous social base. Another member associated to her experience of watching Michael Palin's East European programme and was interested that the members of those societies were mourning for the Soviet influence. He had asked, 'Do you like it more now Soviets have left? The answer was a resounding no! He continued that in control and politics something was not quite right here too. We didn't like Blair but we could project into him.

Theme 3: Splitting
This theme followed and seemed to arise as a result of Theme 2 above. The pre-occupations and experiences of members were of things not being quite what they seem. And there was a heightened awareness of the polarisation of the coexistence of good and bad within us. The experience was of fear of disconnectedness with other human beings and with the world. There was an ensuing desire to cling on to our humanity. In a wish for previous times members asked 'Why is it difficult to be ordinary?' Connected to this was a realisation that hope is not here - it is a non theme. Nothing is as it seems therefore no identity. All of this was extremely difficult to understand. A member said, 'You can't trust Gordon Brown because he presents one thing and does another. There is no integrity I found the election thing a bit disheartening'. Another member spoke of Che Guevara who had written of 'New Man': a new man with different values. It was also his experience that his PhD research was also creating another identity crisis. He asked, do you enter the academic race to create a 'New Man', or do you go with the flow. Too many things don't fit. Another member raised the issue of the man who has created artificial life, he explained that he was quite excited by it, it could send shocks but maybe also some hope in science. This was linked to 'New Man' by asking, can we make him? Another member felt he resonated with all this; the Camden trip my brother also got caught the same way. He was aware of his experience that there were a lot of enquiries going on at the moment such as de Menezes - you come to London and anything can happen. He related his experience of walking to the train that

morning when he had listened to a Chinese woman talking on her mobile. She asked do you have someone to cook for you? I could bring some groceries - I'm a very good cook. For him it seemed that the world continues as ever. Good women still do what women do, and men will do what men will do. There may be problems with ice caps, yes, but underneath nothing changes. Another member spoke to his experience of meeting a friend of his from S.A who was invited to go to the UN to honour him for his work and to declare October 2nd 'non-violence day'. He had complained that the Indian Government was wasting so much money buying first class fares. On his way back from the UN he saw him again and he wasn't able to say anything about the event other than he was very privileged to have had the first class flight. The event was attended by two Nobel Peace Prize winners but he couldn't say anything about it. He felt that maybe he had lost his humanity to a materialistic world, which if true was very disturbing. Another member stated that she felt strongly that we have lost our voice in everyday things. For example, you ring BT and you talk to someone in India. You have no authority as a client, before you were a client paying for it, but no longer, you have no power. In the same way, how do we really affect politics? She continued, big organizations know customer complaints don't make money and cynically they stop us getting to that stage. A woman described how a young Asian bus driver shouted at her saying, 'you can't be 60' - she went red. The whole bus laughed and while it was embarrassing it was also funny. She said she felt good all day and felt that it was something to do with humanity. You don't often see people smiling. There is something underneath if we took the risk to find it. But I also swear at people in the car, that's my nasty side. A different member said that it was his experience that we are very selective in what we see awful things such as people being pushy and aggressive we talk about. But hen he goes out by car he has to cross a main road, someone has to let him pass and every day someone does but we only talk about nasty experiences. He continued, I have a freedom pass and travelling on night busses is a revelation. There is no aggression, night workers going home, young people going home. He asked, why don't we see most of the time. Nothing would work if we did not co-operate. We see it when it goes wrong. In twenty four years my house has not been broken into, and the kids in the street are safe but that's not how we experience it. Another member related his experience of travelling on a train when a woman got on going the wrong way. She rang someone to tell them of her problem and someone promised to go to the station and pick her up. Everyone heard her and felt pleased for her that someone had helped on the train and someone was picking her up. All were making eye contact and humanity expressed by all. We normally shut ourselves away behind a newspaper or whatever. Britain is better than other places, that's why people want to come here.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this Part members worked with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, to collectively identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, to develop hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here they were working more with what might be called the 'psycho' or 'internal' world of participants: the participants collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. On this occasion the Members identified two interrelated Hypotheses, as follows:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1: From Feeling Nobodies to Social Aggression

Analysis: The Convener started the session by referring to the fact that the group had seemed to be pre-occupied by the notion of aggression and asking what was going on in our minds about this. The membership took up this issue and the first contributor said that this resonates with internal sense of lack of agency. Our sense of agency is being taken away from us. He continued that this was at the heart of the promotion of aggression. Someone may get something more than me. The question was raised that if we talk of being deprived what is it that we are being deprived of. It was felt that what members of society are being deprived of is an opportunity, for example, a place in the queue. Some sort of advantage as perceived by members of society at the time. Envy and jealousy of someone who is a somebody. We also loose the capacity to see each other. A sense of agency, a sense of clear framework, clear boundaries in which you can grow. Being excluded, not exciting, death, love? Agency means an ability to act on behalf of oneself and to achieve what one wants to achieve. Non agency means an experience of annihilation, helplessness, of being a non person, nobodies. This was seen as a challenge to our own humanity. It was felt that the reason members of society experienced life this way was because of the new way of life and a lack of consistency, continuity and confirmation, in effect it was as though we experience nothingness. Being in this highly anxiety provoking and distressing situation members of society have a wish to be looked after, a wish for dependency, someone or something to help them with their impotence. When this wish for dependency is not fulfilled then members of society react with aggression as a social act. Being aggressive you exist - you are someone. It seems that members of society are in effect saying 'I'm important you are ignoring me, it's a narcissistic injury, and you therefore seek to make oneself important.

Hypothesis: Because of the extensive environmental changes arising from globalisation members of society experience life as lacking in consistency and continuity and are unable to confirm their identities. This is experienced as disintegration which is akin to psychological death, annihilation and nothingness, and of seemingly being a non person. Faced with such impotence members of society have a wish to be looked after, in an intensified wish for dependency. However, all members of society are experiencing this same phenomenon and no one is able to provide for the dependency needs of others. A result is envy of any other member of society who is seen as being somebody. And with a view to being somebody we react with social aggression as a means of getting what we want.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2: Splitting, Leading to a World of Extreme Views

Analysis: There was less certainty as to this analysis. It started with an assertion that globalisation has stripped us of our personality. It was felt that there is no big story so we have to create stories. It was seen as something about a fight over what is ordinary. There is not a common narrative so we have a fight over our views. It was considered to be a difficult reality and a member asked, what is real and not real? It was felt there was an absence of information in the first place. Not being able to agree a common story we are left angry and frustrated. It was experienced as highly disorienting, members of society are in a paranoid schizoid position and unable to get into the depressive position. It seemed difficult to construct a story with hope in it. A member made an association saying he couldn't help but associate to Rwanda and the extreme inhumanity experienced there. Other joined to this referring to Burma and Darfur, adding that it was too awful to think about. This led to an inability to speak about it and

others felt that members of society were unable to speak about good and bad things. It was asked why members of society are so preoccupied with the negative? An association was made to the fact that children's stories are frightening; that we choose to be frightened; and this mobilises us to fight back. Members of society tune out normal everyday co-operation and heighten the things that make them afraid. The normal background noise is not noticed, we are hypersensitive to the things that are frightening (such as for example a knifing in a park). At the same time members of society cling to known realities such as the readily recognised symbols and signs of the church; and the familiarity of motorway driving. In general our inner world seems to be out of sync with outer world. Members of society are using splitting to cope with their anxieties. Previously people would have queued, now we don't share those values; who ever gets to the front first wins. There is something more fearful occurring now, something about annihilation, issues of identity and threat of the other. We seem to have a phobia about scarcity of resources. I am concerned about being egocentric. It used to be think of others first - why did everything change?

Hypothesis: Because of the loss of identity and subsequent experience of disintegration referred to in the hypothesis above, members of society experience extreme anxiety. As a means of coping with and avoiding their unbearable thoughts and feelings they adopt the primitive defence mechanism of splitting, by identifying with and idealising known and familiar 'good' objects and viewing all unfamiliar or changed objects as not just bad but frightening and scary. This makes it seemingly impossible to view social objects as having the potential to be both good and bad and members of society are out of touch with reality. A result is that a whole range of social objects are either idealised or experienced as frightening and threatening when the full information does not support such notions.

<u>Convenor</u>: Lionel F Stapley, Director of OPUS