

Britain and the World
at Autumn 2012
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on 3rd October



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

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 collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

1. Lack of trust and of moral/ethical/leadership or creativity or new thinking

Lack of leadership globally results in failure of all sorts (economy, politics, and personal integrity) – the whole planet feels adrift. The nameless are replacing the faceless in party and cabinet reshuffles, where are the figures to inspire us, in politics or leaders in industry? It's hard to see anyone you can have faith in. The US presidential campaign debates: it's hard not to feel sorry for Obama, he was set up for failure, with excessive adulation when he first won, but he's really done nothing. And it's not clear what anyone is going to do? Everyone seems to be reacting like a rabbit in the headlights, no one dares to do anything for fear of making mistakes. Yes, Obama will get re-elected, but the question is why should he be?

Where are the strengths we can trust in? Or is the system failing, regardless of who is in power? The problem is a glut of shysters, not a lack of leaders. There is no trust in anyone and so we panic that no one really knows what to do.

At the same time, it does feel like certain stories are blown all out of proportion by the media, they direct their attention too much towards certain type of stories, for instance the running away of the schoolgirl with her teacher. It went on for days and days, while other more important stories (about the paedophile ring) were relatively unreported. What was it about that story that so captivated us – the abuse of authority? That teachers have to withstand temptation? Another example of corrupt leadership?

Being in authority and in a leadership role has got nothing to do with ethics anymore, it's all become commercial, it's all about getting your own way. Alan Sugar has a lot to answer for.

Parties seem to be disconnected from citizenship, there is little initiative from below, but at the same time a feeling that you can't leave it to the leaders, because you're disillusioned with them. When people have taken to the streets to demonstrate, they have been ignored. Throughout Europe, it seems that the democratic process is being lost, with Angela Merkel increasingly speaking on behalf of the EU, because she pays the bills, and the bizarre accounting practices of the EU do not inspire us with confidence.

2. Personal responsibility or hiding behind the system (which is breaking down anyway?)

Is this all too micro-level though, while the macro-system is completely broken? If Spain and Greece default then Germany is in trouble, France is worse too, it will be a domino effect. It seems that whichever way they go, we are doomed. But it's equally damaging to just do nothing – and there doesn't seem to be any forward motion, or are there no options to change the system? It sometimes feels that although we humans created the systems, it has now gone so far beyond us that no one can stop it anymore. Michael Sandel and the Archbishop of Canterbury have been calling for a rethinking of the human project and to reconnect markets with the moral roots.

That was the plea with Occupy too, but it just expressed frustration, there didn't seem to be anything constructive there, no serious rethinking of paradigms. A bit like the Tea Party – endless splitting and demonising, you cannot change models from a paranoid position, you need to reflect more. But does it all have to collapse before we are willing to make a change, are we just content to muddle along until then? In other places, other times, it would have lead close to a revolution. Take Syria, for example, they really are on the brink, but is that because they have to fight to change a political system – so a clear objective. Here in Britain, the government doesn't seem to work for the people, but for corporations, democracy has lost its meaning and is funded by companies.

When you start working for the NHS you undergo an induction and you are given a thick manual full of processes. If you don't follow these rules and processes, you live in fear of being penalised. Most of the processes are simple common sense, but they become an instrument of terror, as there are so many of them, to avoid corruption, to meet targets, massive policies, which lead to this faceless leadership and feeling of disempowerment. No one feels they can change anything, but then they see others flaunting all those rules and suffering no consequences whatsoever. There are so many leaflets and policies now for volunteers on how to behave with and look after children, yet abuse of older people and careworkers is shocking. And that scares me more: because I too will be old and helpless one day.

The Hillsboro case – remarkable case of collusion by media, police, ambulance, coroners, all responsible, decent, ordinary people, yet who behaved badly. It's not just government, it's the establishment, the fact that it is all large and faceless, so no one can pin anything on just one individual. It has also become almost impossible for people to say they are sorry, everyone is terrified of admitting they were wrong. This collusion affects all of us – we've colluded with the banking system. What causes it? The comfort of the known, or the fear of putting your head up above the parapet. Easier by far to bury yourself in collective responsibility. Case in point – Jimmy Saville case. Yes, there had been complaints, but there was some collusion. So you start to worry about what else we don't know? The priest denouncing practices within the Vatican after his death: why didn't he do it earlier? But he couldn't do it while he was still part of the establishment. Is any of what we see really valid? Or are we all falling victim to groupthink and we all end up doing something that none of us really want to do.

More and more I am discovering that the things that really please me in life are close to home, my choir, working with children, small things that give me lasting satisfaction and a sense of security.

On a smaller scale, I've been impressed by community efforts to find April Jones, the little abducted girl – there does seem to be a big difference between the private and public commitment. That's why meaning is given through small actions on a daily basis, you can change and act positively, have influence on your immediate environment, family, friends, professional circles. We need to celebrate these small successes.

3. Bread and circuses distracts from real thinking

It has felt like a year of bread and circuses: despite rising winter fuel prices, mess with tax and allowances, the nation has been blinded by false feel-good factors. When the most common item stolen in shops is food, it's clear that families cannot afford to pay bills and put food on the

table. Yet people go on about being a great nation, in what feels like utter deceit and disassociation from reality. Every law seems to put more money in the pockets of the rich.

It also depends on priorities. Haven't there been cases of teachers paying for children to have a breakfast at school, because they weren't getting any at home, but their families did have extra stuff such as flatscreen TVs. How true is that representation? I saw a programme on TV about an ex-army man on minimum wage, his wife was also on minimum wage and they had two kids. They did not have enough money to put food on the table. They were really committed to working, but they were squeezed and the poor woman felt so incompetent and like a bad mother, although there was no problem with addiction or unemployment or anything.

The new pension for everyone to pay into also has the clause for opting out – no one quite knows how it will work, and if it is a solution. For people earning £8000 a year in household revenue, it could be those crucial £100 that they are not paying into a pension that make all the difference. However, this is something that all three parties agreed on as necessity, it is a well-thought through policy but it comes at a time when people feel the pinch. But instead of instantly criticising, we should acknowledge this as a first step and build on it.

We will be conducting a Living Wage week-long campaign in November – 20 local authorities in London have agreed to set an example and pay enough to cover basic family needs rather than just the minimum wage. And they're going to demand it of their contractors too. The beauty of it is that the Exchequer benefits from it too, because they transfer the responsibilities to the employer (and ultimately to the tax-payer?)

4. The world has changed but we haven't kept pace

Perhaps we have reached a point where the world system is changing. There was one such point when the world moved from serfdom to capitalism via the industrial revolution, but now politics is not changing, even though the world is changing. We are no longer citizens of just GB but of the world.

It feels like there is no way to snap out of it, that the interlocking rules are defeating us. Example: a mass lecture, but the lecture theatre was too small for all the audience. However, they were not allowed to get extra chairs, no larger room was available, no timetable changes were possible and it was not in the contract to do the same lecture twice. So the result was that nothing could be done, except sit and hope that not all of the people would turn up. But if there would have been a fire in the room, who would have been responsible? No one. They would all have blamed the rulebook.

The right thing to do might be the wrong thing to do according to the rulebooks.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, participants will collectively try to identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at this time; and, develop hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at this moment. Here we want to work 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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: The violence of the reaction and debate in the room about lack of leadership and global capitalism (perceived as corrupting and self-destructive) shows that people are feeling disenfranchised, alienated. People feel they have played by the rules all their lives and now feel betrayed (or even penalised) through the moral injustice they are discovering. Rules are there to

play by them or to sabotage them. Too many flaunt them and do not pay the price. A lot of bafflement, anger and helplessness seemed to be expressed.

Hypothesis: Because we see no consequences in immoral behaviour, we as a society feel alienated from leadership, authority and rules, which results in a withdrawal of public participation.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Collusion has always gone on. What has changed is the pace of development of global institutions and their absolute dominance not just of the markets, but also of politics. Leaders don't seem able to control these behemoths, so they have chosen to go along with them instead of fighting them. That is what is causing a gap between them and civil society: government does not represent civil society anymore. Therefore they have to create diversionary tactics, such as the Olympics, to distract people's attention from this abyss.

Hypothesis: Because of a transfer of primary power to global corporations, governments are losing their authority and ability to govern, which results in a lack of credibility and trust.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Parents themselves seem to be losing their authority or leadership over their children, because they have to go out and work to make ends meet, and cannot fulfil their primary functions. Formal systems are becoming victims of their processes, policies, measures, rules and regulations. It has lost meaning and connectedness and seems to be corrupted by greed. People are looking for alternative systems, more spontaneous and informal, somewhere where they can feel part of the whole, where honesty can still exist on a smaller scale. The state seems to have given up on social responsibility and is increasingly relying on philanthropy, charity, patronage to foot the bills, but this leads to difficult decisions about who caters for needs and pays. There is the danger that small-scale local systems, however, only serve to prop up the macrosystem, allowing it to continue unchanged.

Hypothesis: Because the government is giving up on its social responsibility function, volunteers and the big society are stepping in, which in the long run may reinvigorate politics and society, and lead to a more humane exchange, or which may allow the system in its death throes to continue for longer than its life span warrants.

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