

## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

### Canada and the World at the Dawn of 2016 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

### **Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

In this part of the discussion, participants explored a range of pre-occupations and anxieties.

Many were reflecting on the reality of so many poor and disenfranchised people, living on the street in Toronto and other parts of Canada, not able to get the help they need. In a country like Canada with substantial resources, what is needed many argue, is a re-setting of more equitable values to address the crisis of poverty. Food security, for example, is a huge issue for many; food is no longer affordable. Housing is also becoming a major challenge; the minimum wage is far too low. The legalization of marijuana was discussed. Living in close quarters or subsidized housing, for one participant means "putting up with other people's crap". Another participant noted: "I can't see the sky, I can only see my neighbours windows".

There seems to be a great deal of fear; participants wondered what it was that people seem to be afraid of. Was it related to violence, difference, or rapid change? Fear and misunderstanding has meant less common ground and less ways for building community. Several participants noted the tragic inequality between the wealthy and those who are poor, and the notable lack of generosity. One member commented on the prevalence of greed and talked about Mark Zuckerman's gift of 99% of his wealth to a charity. The member but this really just allows him to keep more of his wealth within his control (as opposed to paying taxes). Yet another spoke of the Bruce Springsteen lyric, "Poor man wants to be rich, rich man wants to be king and a king ain't satisfied until he rules everything."

There is a growing sense of community disintegration and at the same time a deep need to cooperate with our fellow neighbours. Instead we are separated from our groups and our communities. And while there are a lot of people and groups working on these issues, they are working apart not together. At the same time, people in power not looking for real solutions to societal or environmental issues, but implementing "quick-fix solutions" over more sustainable planning (ie poor urban planning). One participant asked, "What if communities worked with communities"? What deeper change and connection

could be created?

There is also a growing sense that “you will never know who I am”. Mental health issues, lack of community services and supportive housing with less opportunities for meaningful work make “living right, hard to do”. The environment is suffering irreparably and no quick fixes will alter this.

Others spoke about how the education system tends to promote competitiveness. As we are in the “Information Age”, it means we have access to information from around the world. Now unlike before, a national issue can become global one (i.e. Pussy Riot) which assists global and national activism. But because there is so much information and rapid change, we can become desensitized and perhaps indifferent. Differences between younger people's use of technology versus older persons lack of understanding of technology was also discussed.

## **Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

*In Part 2 the aim is to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.*

In Part 2, we identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

### **Theme 1: Greed & corruption**

Participants lamented that those in power keep power, and accumulate more and more wealth. They are limited by their own experiences of privilege and self-interest. They do not work with governments to look for real solutions to societal problems; governments do not, in turn, ‘care for’ the needs of the citizens, and then communities as a whole become self-interested and less ‘caring’. Neo-liberal systems, the capitalization of everything create dependencies, helplessness, and rage against these monolithic values and systems worldwide.

### **Theme 2: Growing poverty, disenfranchisement and fear**

Participants recognize the growing gap between the many poor and a very few others. They desire and believe in “real generosity”. And at the same time, they hold a somewhat pessimistic view that much of what looks like generosity tends to be self-serving rather than directed toward real help and real efforts to address systemic problems. More people are poor and more live without opportunities to exercise their rights: to satisfactory housing, to affordable food, paid work, and sense

of belonging and purpose. At the same time, participants believed that some “people do good things for others”. “Playing it forward”, this means that they can none the less continue to do good as well. The overall experience however is one of pessimism and uncertainty.

### **Theme 3: The media supports consumerism and inhibits questioning**

Aggressive media and advertising makes it impossible for citizens to understand or experience anything but the drive to accumulate. Constant images of what the good life ‘is’ shapes the idea of what is ‘normal’ that does not allow for reflection and a critical re-setting of community values. And since it is ‘normal’ it is impossible for those who ‘have’ to see the reality of others in the community around them. It is then too painful to reflect – both for those who will not see and for those who see too much.

### **Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

*In this part of the Listening Post the members are working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 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 are 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.*

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1: The failure of the idea of ‘community’**

**Analysis:** The analysis holds a recognition that each of the themes relate to each other, linking questions of how to characterize the experience of the self in relation to the community and to society and as a whole of which we are part. We desire and have rights to respectful and supportive communities, but instead often live in harsh realities, disappointments and injustices. How are we to make sense of very difficult place we find ourselves and our communities as a whole? And at the same time, we insist, that to build community is to make life better for all.

**Hypothesis:** Members face dislocations and disconnections between the themselves and a community which is supposed to but does not entitle, enrich and support them. We know that greed and corruption of the ‘other’ directly disadvantages us. We experience enormous difficulties in ‘ordinary living’, in developing and holding onto a sense of ‘who one really is’ against the proliferation of media images – less about strong communities and more often about the elites. These images work to dissuade us from our own reality and that the idea of

'community' is a failed. This sense of a failed idea stirs primitive feelings of rage which may non the less spark critical thinking.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2. Mourning the loss of the generous & ethical 'other':**

**Analysis:** We feel ourselves suspicious at those who think they are generous. At the same time, we know that generosity is essential for our own lives and the lives of others. We experience an authority and mode of governance which is unresponsive, and decidedly unaccountable in a democratized state in which democracy itself is in question.

**Hypothesis:** Faced with the painful realities of the loss of the generous and ethical other, the other who assures our rights as citizens, and ensures that resources are distributed for and in the community, members of society experience a sense of betrayal, mourning, and primitive anxiety. In spite of this mourning, members recognize a need to enable generosity and act with generousness.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 3. Sense of constant fear**

**Analysis:** Everywhere we look, we are presented with images of violence, injustice, and despair. The experience is one of demoralization and terror, in which it seems that no action can reduce this. Our own physical and psyche survival seems at stake, hence members feel both frightened and seek protection, and at the same time resentful, that protection is constantly needed.

**Hypothesis:** Faced with an erosion of, or loss of the fantasy of safety and security, primitive feelings of annihilation emerge. The result is that subjects must confront the desire for a thing that does not exist and continue to desire it none the less.

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