



## Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

### Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post members were invited by the convenor to contribute, share, identify and explore the experiences and preoccupations in their lives. In the main these appeared to be connected with work and or family.

Members were asked what was on their minds. The first contribution was from a member who was concerned about how society had let down young people, particularly those who feel they have no place in education and society. The member spoke about young people who were being fast tracked into easy rather than meaningful routes and who were angry but that this anger has become normalised. The member raised a question about how can we give hope and provide support to marginalised young people. Jobs and looking for jobs has become a preoccupation in the country but the quality and supply of meaningful work is not available. It is not possible for Ireland's young and marginalised people to get work now.

In the discussion members spoke about how much meaning, identity and satisfaction they get from their work and a member associated this experience with the lack of work and the resultant rage and anger experienced by those without. That afternoon, there had been an accident on the street where the Listening Post was held and someone had been killed. A member read out a report on a mobile phone that a person driving a car had been arrested. Members wondered how this could happen in such a city street and were led to reflect on their experience of a significant rise in destructive behaviour and expressions of rage in Irish society.

The theme of rage and destruction continued with an input from one member who mentioned the highly successful and very violent new Irish television series on RTE. This series, entitled Love/Hate, has won many awards and accolades for its true to life portrayal of Dublin drug dealing criminals. This member spoke of being unable to watch the series – it was too violent and perhaps frighteningly close to reality and not an experience that this member wanted to see.

This was followed by a member spoke about instead wanting to see colour. This was linked to the seeming mismatch between what we are doing in Irish society and what we need to do. Members spoke enthusiastically about the creativity and enthusiasm expressed through the Young Scientist Exhibition, an annual competition for school groups and individual science projects which had just taken place in Dublin. A member noted a comment by a news reporter on RTE who described herself as “this jaded hack” who had been enthused by the creativity and brilliance of the young scientists and their work.

This seemed to resonate with the group: the struggle between the paralysing and destructive nature of who we are and the wish to dig ourselves out and get back in touch with energy and enthusiasm.

A member spoke about an experience at work of internalised anger and depression. While there has been an increase in suicides and suicide attempts in Ireland, the reaction has been one of moral panic and toxic preoccupation rather than a response that supports the on-the-ground work of being with people in distress. Internalised rage and anger at a personal level and a moral outrage in the system has seemed to lead to a defensive withdrawal rather than an engagement with these

deeply painful issues. The member talked about finding themselves in a desperate fight to keep hold of the hope and said that trauma and what it is doing to people hasn't been recognised, acknowledged or faced. This member linked these preoccupations to the colour red for anger and blood.

This was followed by a reference to the increase of incidents of self harm among young people. It was stated that there were 70,000 cases of self-harm reported last year in Ireland, including cases which are understood to be suicide attempts.

However, a question was raised about how workers with responsibilities in this area can retain a capacity to respond in a humane way and to advocate on behalf of young people AND look after themselves at a time of reduced staff and service resources. In this time of increasing cut backs, staff, professionals, clinicians are being asked to work at an unsustainable rate. How can staff be supported in order to respond? A sense of being on a knife edge of hope and despair was spoken about.

Another member spoke about recognising as a worker a strong feeling of shock and fear working with suicide and wondered what was being avoided. Perhaps such stretched services put service providers into survival mode?

Another member remarked that today's newspapers had reported 60,000 deaths in Syria. This was followed by a comment about how destructive things feel, and a sense that there is an unconscious need for killing and bloodletting.

A pervading sense of despair and distress was in the group and a member brought it back to the personal and asked if the situation we are living through in Ireland feels just too big to understand, where we buy a new house and then can't sell the house we have. "It feels like saturation point".

A member replied that it is like working in private practice providing resources and help that in this economic situation so many people can't access. The question came up then of how the help that we can offer can be made accessible.

At this point the focus of the meeting turned to protest and the question of why we and people in Ireland aren't doing what the Greeks are doing, i.e. protesting. This was reflected on and comments from the group included that the lack of protest reflects a guilt for being part of making the current economic situation, not having a right therefore to protest and a sense that as a society we have turned a blind eye. One member said "I have to get on with it now, contribute and take the consequences."

Were we envious? Is that why we followed the path we did? The envy of the old of the young, the envy that blocked the older generation from parenting the younger generation in a responsible way. A member drew attention to the curiously strong interest we have in public figures' salaries, our over representation at political level and a suggestion that this perhaps comes from our history: needing people to speak on our behalf.

And so we came to our history and identity: a sense of decency was very strong in the Irish. People earned little and managed to get by. People lived in communities and looked out for each other. Earnings were not a preoccupation, now they are. A member commented on a newspaper piece from U.K. telling the story of a man who perhaps angrily filled in the section on dependents on his tax return forms with a number that included all the unemployed and the immigrants.

But a member pointed out how their children were so enjoying what now again are the advantages of privilege such as university. A sense of living in parallel universes of privilege and disadvantage and the unacceptable nature of knowing that some people never had a chance. The member suggested that perhaps anger is what we need if we are to protest, that anger is motivating, and perhaps there is no alternative other than to protest. The member said that we haven't and aren't creating a vision and reminded the group that it was 100 years since the Dublin lock out, a defining

moment in the development of the labour movement. The awful realisation is that the gap between the rich and poor got worse in the boom years.

And so back to the guilt or anger about the waste the Irish made of the boom years. Another member mentioned German friends who lived a good and simple life; this member had a sense of being in touch with something shameful about the Irish having been swept away and surrendering to another set of hopes. The German friends had seemed to be able to stay in touch with reality which as a nation we didn't seem able to do. Irish resources and identity around values and a particular knowledge were lost. The Irish come from a peasant class, a colonised society. While we lived in poverty in the 1950s there has been a generation change of values, a generation change of expectations and of what is important in life. And after the boom and bust a wish to reconnect with our values as Irish people was expressed. We have been like shifting sands, we went with the wind.

Another member then spoke to the group commenting that sales in IKEA rocket in a recession. And so the theme came back to jobs. This time one of should I stay or should I go: when you have a job you have to keep it because they are so few and far between but you can't progress because there are no vacancies, no one is moving. There is now a feeling in Ireland that if you want to move on in your career you don't stay in Ireland, you move on, perhaps not now to Europe but to China.

The question of what we value arose again. It feels like there are dwindling resources in Ireland and the world. A comment was made that IKEA does well because it focuses on customers. The headline in the newspaper says that the Irish government is cutting medical cards by 40,000. It sounds bad but actually those losing the cards will be people over 70 who, having been means tested, are assessed as having enough resources to pay for their own health care. Our pharmaceutical costs are the highest in Europe because our doctors use particular drugs and aren't changing. How reluctant are we to let go to our habits? A belief that a rebalancing is now required.

The discussion ended with a member returning to a sense of despair. This rebalancing requires dialogue, a space for talking and reflection but instead it seems that there is little hunger for this. The preferred and habitual option is that of attack and defend. How can we find more spaces to talk?

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

In Part Two the aim was to identify the themes emerging from Part One. The members broke up into two groups and in the feedback to the large group named the following themes:

### Group One:

1. Splits in Society: rich/poor; stay/go; young/old; protest/no protest; boom/bust.
2. Responses and Choices: anger, engagement, envy, energy (non passivity)
3. Dialogue (but the difficulty of engaging) to search for values and vision.

### Group Two:

1. Envy
2. Lost our values and now looking for reference points
3. Retain capacity to respond and advocate
4. Attack on linking and thinking
5. Need to dissociate to survive.
6. Letting go and rebalancing
7. Scapegoating and sacrificing our young people through our greed.
8. Defended against feeling the consequences of shame and guilt but need to if we are to recover rather than just survive.

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

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information 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.

### Analysis and Hypothesis

#### *Boom and Bust*

**Analysis:** Members were preoccupied with the boom and bust. The image came of the bursting of a bubble, a phantasy bubble, which the boom and our part in it represented. An association to the sinking of the Titanic was given to the group. As the ship hit the iceberg there was an immediate paranoid-schizoid response, a desperate attempt to keep the ship on the ocean. Ireland and its people are still trying desperately to keep ourselves afloat. There is a denial of uncertainty and the sense in the membership of how as a nation we have and continue to defend against the psychological pain of what has happened and our role in it because of the guilt which makes mourning and letting go of our collective psychotic phantasy impossible.

#### *The wish for dialogue and understanding*

**Analysis:** Members are preoccupied with a sense of Irish society needing and wanting to be in a place of reparation and healing. There is a hope to create space for thinking and linking. Members recognised the hopeful possibility, the 'different feel', of the current Oireachtas (Irish Parliamentary) Health Committee Hearings on Abortion. The Hearings represent a new model which provides space for talking, for making sense and meaning on a highly divisive issue and thus provides an alternative to the more familiar schizoid-paranoid attack/defend, fight/flight, culture of reaction as presented through the media. There is a yearning to give birth to a space in which we can think, a transitional space, a place for reverie where we might find a way of managing the uncertainty, allowing the ambivalence and letting go of what we need to and mourn our lost possibilities, reconnect with reality and trust ourselves. Alongside the anger, rage and disappointment stands the wish to reconnect to ourselves, our values and to think about what is really good for us as a nation.

**Hypothesis:** Perhaps because we were a colonised nation, we gave up our independence and placed our leaders into an impossible parental role, a containing role but one that denied dialogue, shared responsibility and thus denied ourselves as citizens personal authority, potency and identity. So we have created an atmosphere of rage, anger and impotence on one side and a yearning and a wish to reconnect with our own humanity and our capacity as individuals and as a nation to act and think in a maturely interdependent context.

**Hypothesis:** Irish society moved from a fundamentally failed dependent colonial position and a phantasy bubble.....

And while we are still stuck in a paranoid/schizoid unintegrated state struggling to process the feelings of shame, envy, guilt, trauma, disappointment, disillusionment, anger and sadness of lost values and opportunities, we are also, notwithstanding, struggling to respond and advocate and develop a capacity to think.

Perhaps the W.B. Yeats poem below puts the feeling well:

#### September 1913

What need you, being come to sense,  
But fumble in a greasy till  
And add the halfpence to the pence  
And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
You have dried the marrow from the bone?  
For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,

It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet they were of a different kind,  
The names that stilled your childish play,  
They have gone about the world like wind,  
But little time had they to pray  
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,  
And what, God help us, could they save?  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread  
The grey wing upon every tide;  
For this that all that blood was shed,  
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
All that delirium of the brave?  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,  
And call those exiles as they were  
In all their loneliness and pain,  
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair  
Has maddened every mother's son':  
They weighed so lightly what they gave.  
But let them be, they're dead and gone,  
They're with O'Leary in the grave.

**Convener: Jude Bowles**