

**"Holland and the World
at the Dawn of 2004"
Report of a Listening Post
held in January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part of the Listening Post the participants were invited to share the experiences they had in their various social roles: as an employee or employer; as a pensioner or as a member of a political or religious organisation, as a neighbour or volunteer, as a member of a family or a community. This part focuses in particular on "every-day experiences". Experiences related to the social or external world of the participant.

On 12 January 2004 a teacher at a school for technical and vocational training for 12-16 year-olds in The Hague, was shot dead by a pupil with an immigrant background. It shook up the Netherlands, but also created a feeling of despair about the lack of so much as an idea of how these kinds of incidents could be prevented. Obviously, Listening Post participants raised this event, but it did not dominate the meeting. Other experiences could also be shared in great measure. The second part of the report consists of a summary of these experiences.

Part 2. ESTABLISHING THE MAIN THEMES

The purpose of the second part was to come to a joint definition of the main themes that had come out of part 1. It was quite easy for the participants to mention a fair number of themes, although there was some overlapping. All this could be summarized as follows:

1. An important theme was the effect limited physical and psychological space has on people. We live on top of each other and all grouped together; everything in life is speeding up and the only way you can have some peace and quiet is by withdrawing far away from social life; which in itself is not even all that easy. Manners and agreements are missing or people do not observe them. This way people are a nuisance to one another. A parallel was drawn between people and rats in a cage who finally end up eating each other. The increase in aggressiveness and/or decrease in tolerance towards each other are noticeable in society. A feeling of insecurity is growing.

Access to information is enormous; at the same time this leads to a great mental burden. Partly due to great pressure on participation and involvement in the working environment and filling various social roles, people gradually have less 'space in their minds' to be concerned about their fellow man. The quality of

contacts with fellow men is seriously pressurized. People become alienated from the common things in life. At times, life seems like an absurdist stage play.

2. People increasingly experience the world as being complex. Things that happen, both nationally and internationally, can no longer be understood and seem to take place outside people's ranges of influence. This leads more and more to a feeling of impotence and apathy. Why form an opinion if you cannot grasp everything anyway? People do not feel capable of turning the tide. Serious events in the country lead to fierce reactions among the population and an appeal to the government to take action. The media are sometimes responsible for a communication breakdown or polarization and, as a result, for intensifying the emotions of the citizens.

The government is partly blamed for being the cause of the events, because they have tolerated abuses for too long. To a lesser degree they are regarded as a reliable authority. The government answer leads to an increase in bureaucracy, strict inspection, in an obligation to carry identification, the establishment of committees or organisations or the application of measures at will. It makes citizens feel restricted in their individual freedom. The relation between government and citizens can be described as a 'double bind'. Due to the threat of losing their position of power, politicians find it difficult to take a personal stand.

3. It seems an illusion that the world will become one enormous space for each individual to move in freely. Crossing boundaries for instance, between systems, countries, organisations, involves more and more strict screening of identity, reliability and restriction of privacy, through surveillance cameras, tapping telephone lines and computers. The thought that this should contribute to the safety of the citizen does not seem to be understood as such by the citizen himself. It intensifies the idea that it is not safe and serious events confirm the powerlessness of the government, which intensifies feelings of insecurity even more.

It is said that people on their way to the large space seem to move from one prison into the other. In addition moving freely seems to depend on the economic benefit that this move will bring (tourism/immigrants).

4. Questions are raised about the impact of the current life style of people on consciousness. The movement of the masses that takes place on the motorways or by rail every day serves as an example. Every day being caught in a traffic-jam and driving for hours from one place to the other. Apathetically, people seem to adopt this way of travelling and spend a lot of their time on this. How does it affect people? The inconvenience of travelling, however, also seems to be compensated by individual pleasures, such as: meeting other people and discovering new places and perhaps even moments to escape social commotion.
5. Individualism (and the consequences connected with it) is a final theme, mentioned by many a person. People no longer seem to be able to resign themselves to inconveniences and to their fate. The disadvantages involved with being human, must be smoothed away. Health, looking beautiful, talent, top education, no pain and even staying alive forever; people seem to think that they are entitled to it and demand provisions from the government to guarantee this.

Part 3. FORMING AN ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS

In this part of the Listening Post the participants as a group try, on the basis of part 1 and 2, to name the current underlying conscious or unconscious dynamics of what is happening in the world and to come to hypotheses in relation to what is going on at the moment. Now the participants are more involved with the so-called 'inner world'. Their collective ideas and thoughts that on the one hand determine how they experience external reality and on the other hand determine their actions towards that external world.

It was not easy to come to the formulation of clear and unambiguous hypotheses from the above-mentioned observations. An attempt has been made below to discuss the themes at a higher level of abstraction. This leads to the following hypotheses:

Analysis and hypothesis 1.

Analysis: The economic recession and the government policy to economize on the social welfare state have increased the fear of losing acquired rights. The inequality in the world and the participation in international collaborations make that problems cannot be kept outside the country's borders. (Europe, Iraq, Immigrants) The government is blamed for not providing sufficient safeguards so that we can continue life in the same way as before.

Hypothesis: The (imminent) loss of existing material provisions and personal perspective make society look like a rock with apes where everyone tries to shift calamity on to others as much as possible. At the same time people are part of and take part in this development.

It puts pressure on the self-image of the tolerant, self-conscious Dutchman, he who knows what is best for the world. Attempts are made to make the government, immigrants, other individuals or groups in society responsible for these annoying feelings that are the result of the loss of moral superiority.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Proper attention has been paid to individualism. Individualism seems to force modesty, concern for one another, a feeling of community and solidarity, into the background. The individual has his own standards and strives for his own goals. In this respect, the post-war welfare state has also created individuals who are less accustomed to dealing with disappointments or solving problems themselves. Frustrations of individuals frequently lead to aggressive, at times even murderous actions. Security of schools, institutions and public areas is the answer to the increasing feeling of insecurity.

Hypothesis: The principle that each individual is equal to the other one, that each individual should be able to do what he or she wants to do, provided he or she does not restrict someone else's space by doing so, seems to cut off its nose to spite its face. Disintegration, absence of standards and violence in society come up, which as a paradox have to be fought by means of restrictions of the individual freedom. This moment is described as the end of a pyramid game or a chain letter. Conventional

society has come to an end. The question is how to create a new game without falling into old mistakes.

Movements will arise that will establish the failure of individualism and will start emphasizing the feeling of community again. Current pessimism would fit well with the present older generation that had different ideals and has stands to defend. They will have to disengage from their achievements and realise that they are merely a link in the developments in the world.

The young, on the other hand, will have a more realistic approach to the current problems and will find their own way in this.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3.

Analysis: The world economy has to grow all the time. The economy needs consuming citizens. At the same time the economy allows individuals to develop their talents through working in companies. The economic growth results in increasing pollution. The economic competition creates a constantly increasing contrast between poor and rich; in the Netherlands but also between countries and continents.

Hypothesis: The capitalist economy has brought wealth and development to many and at the same time grinding poverty to even more others. Due to his producing and consuming role in the economy, the citizen cannot hide from the negative consequences of these roles. He feels he does not have an influence on it. Individual actions are more likely to seriously harm him. This often leads to feelings of impotence, isolation, apathy or frustration and extremism, both on a national and international level. The balance will want to restore itself on a world level by lifting trade barriers, immigration, work and at worst by means of war/terrorism.

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