**"Sweden and the World
at the Dawn of 2004"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on Monday 19th January 2004
Sabbatsbergsvägen 1, Stockholm

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Stokholm (2)

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part of the Listening Post the participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. Among the 14 participants many worked as consultants in various types of organisations, both in the public sector, and in industrial settings. The majority were women and the age range was from the late thirties and upwards, with a predominance for people in their fifties. Most of the participants had taken part in one or more Group Relations conferences before, but there were also some who had not done so.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. On this occasion, three main interconnected themes could be identified. These were based on discussions in four small sub-groups consisting of three or four participants followed by a short reporting back to the whole group.

a) *The individual and the collective*.
The participants talked about "we in relation to the rest of the world" and difficulties in balancing duty and responsibility towards one's own family and the rest of the world. One aspect was the need for individual freedom and responsibility in relation to not knowing where to draw a boundary. Feelings of guilt and shame for wanting to do more, but often not feeling satisfied with one's actions and a sense of not knowing what actions would be useful. To this theme can be linked thoughts about ethics and examples illustrating the dilemma around the responsibility of the individual and that of the society as a collective, linked to a lack of shared visions in our society.

b) *Coherence, continuity and relatedness versus fragmentation, splitting and projection*.
Many participants expressed a satisfaction with regard to their personal life, their family, children, work etc, but they also had wish to belong to a larger context, to feel connected in a deeper sense. Many interactions both between work units and between people were experienced as fragmented and superficial. Some described a feeling of loneliness, and an increased speed in communication and other areas, which seems to enhance the feeling of fragmentation. The lack of coherence also increases the difficulty

in predicting what might happen, based on one's experiences. An issue linked to this was the importance of allowing dreams about things we want to do or experience, ideals to think about and the need to reach out to these dreams. The wish for fulfilment of our dreams can give a sense of meaning, continuity and coherence, at least for a while.

c) *Power and powerlessness and the use and abuse of power.*
This issue had several roots, one being that we are expected to be able to control more than we possibly can. When this fails we feel powerless and have to depend on others, managers and other authorities of various kinds. And this raised questions about trust, and whom can we trust in what situations. Our relationship with persons in authority was discussed in terms of trust as well as their capacity for formulating meaningful goals and visions that can inspire. Some mentioned that enterprises in the industrial sector seem more concerned about visions for the future than the public sector and the politicians. Contempt towards politicians with short-ranged goals, based on the wish for re-election rather than long-term planning was expressed.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 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 participants were working more with what might be called their 'internal' world, their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. After the reporting back of the sub-groups and definitions of the themes presented above, a lively and enthusiastic discussion began. Efforts to struggle with an analysis and formulation of hypotheses were made, but we only reached a bit on the way. This analysis has been summarised in the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1.

Analysis: A former more stable pattern in the Swedish society has changed into an unpredictable and complex pattern as a result of the EC, the general globalisation, IT etc. The support given by a common vision based on solidarity is gone. And so far nothing else seems to have emerged that could be seen as something of a common goal to strive for. The old model that promised security and protection has collapsed in a way that is not very clear. This leaves a lot of people insecure about what value systems to rely upon, and how to balance the responsibility of individuals and their needs versus needs and responsibilities on a more collective level.

Hypothesis: The culture in our society, which has had peace for many years and for a long time has been a fairly "safe place" is changing. We are faced with a change in basic assumption from a more dependency-oriented climate to a climate characterised by forces of market economy and competition on a societal scale. This process is not going particularly smoothly, and there is a fear that it may end in a more or less chaotic situation. There seems to be a hope that if enough people wake up and react to the complex reality of today, it may create a better understanding of what is going on. But if we stay in a state of feeling lost and abandoned it is going to be worse. The result is a split between those who crave for dependency and believe in the leaders who take this line of action, and those who do not believe this will work. The denial of basic changes

in our social structure and the need to wake up and find a solution enough people can agree upon seems to be massive.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: A need for coherence and meaning, for linking things together versus fragmentation and splitting as well as a need for relatedness, for gratification and being seen and listened to, was expressed. A longing for sharing thoughts together with others and for meaningful social interaction which, when it happens, makes one feel "whole", present and alive was evident. A general experience was that administrative, technological or economic devices etc. keep many things apart, consciously or unconsciously. Hard core data has priority over human aspects i.e. soft data, in a way that does not make sense. But at the same time, there was also a curiosity about what will come, and what new perspectives can be seen. A shared need for positive experiences and for allowing oneself to enjoy the good things in life as well as the bad ones was also evident. Things were also seen as changing more rapidly now. Issues that were important earlier are no longer important, and what we now perceive as important might lose its important before long. An emerging interest in spiritual issues among younger people was mentioned but not elaborated and this could also be seen as a way of finding meaning.

Hypothesis: The main content here was a general experience of fragmentation, projection and splitting, and a strong wish for meaningfulness and linking. The tendency to separate and differentiate things, work tasks, work units etc. in a way that does not make any sense can be seen as a form of social structure as defence against anxiety. The underlying assumption can be expressed in terms of a fear for allowing thinking through the complexity of many work situations and work tasks. The fragmentation allows for simple, one-dimensional solutions and there is less need (if any) for long-term planning, reflection and learning through systematic feedback from the persons and groups involved in the various sub-systems.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Power and abuse of power was the third theme that could be identified. The power of information in terms of media and IT was perceived as a very strong force. A common experience was that you never know when you can trust the content in a lot of papers, nor can you trust what politicians etc. say in their campaigns and in other official settings. Many examples of how power can be abused and perverted with very destructive consequences were given.

Hypothesis: When those in power, such as political leaders or managers in big industrial companies use their power in a way that gives rise to disappointment, people feel cheated. They feel robbed of their ideals and disillusioned, sometimes mixed with guilt and shame. Partly because they feel they have not been interested enough or knowledgeable enough to understand that something was basically wrong, sometimes terribly much so. Partly because they realise that they will never learn what lies underneath certain actions by described in media etc. due to a general cover up for unknown reasons. An underlying source for this can be that the disillusion we experience, when we are confronted with the underlying reality, can be so strong that

the reality is denied, and transformed into something less severe or projected onto others. We want to believe in good causes etc. because it makes us feel good ourselves, even though we are often faced with the contrary. We therefore prefer to split off, and project the bad things onto other groups, politicians, leaders etc.

CONVENOR: Siv Boalt Boethius