

**"Holland and the World
at the Dawn of 2006"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 11th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

During 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 as an employer, as a pensioner or as a member of a political or religious organization, as a neighbour or as a volunteer, as a member of a family or a community. This part mainly concentrates on "the events in everyday life", which are related to the social or external world of the participant.

The period preceding this Listening Post was relatively quiet. At least there were no shocking events like the ones we had these past few years. A political and religious murder on home territory or a Tsunami which received ample mondial attention. During this Listening Post the changing legislation around the medical expenses had a lot of attention. A more local 'bone of contention' making the Dutch citizen alert and sharpen his tongue. The core of the matter is that every Dutchman will receive the same basic medical insurance, so there will be no distinction between Dutch National Health patients and private patients. The reform of the legislation concerning medical expenses has been under discussion for years. Listening Post participants brought this event forward, but it did not dominate the meeting.

Other experiences could also be shared to a large degree. They have been summarized in the second part [part 2.] of the report. Although it was not always easy to avoid discussions, there was more exploration than last year.

Part 2. DETERMINATION OF THE MAIN THEMES

The objective of the second part was to name and define the main themes arising from part 1. The participants did not have any difficulty in naming quite a number of themes, although there was some overlapping. Summing up:

1. **Insecurity and confusion** were relevant themes for many a person. People feel that it is almost impossible to understand the changes in society and to come to grips with them. They do not feel connected, involved, they feel at a distance from what is going on in the world. Some of the questions referring to this were: "The world outside is gradually getting smaller". Where are we headed as a society; Where do I fit in; What direction do I advise my children to take or which behaviour had they best adopt in this society?

2. **Revaluation of entrepreneurship, looking for sources of inspiration** were likewise mentioned. Many a one indicated that contacts with others both nationally and internationally inspired them greatly. Clubs spring up for the self-employed without employees; groups arise that discuss the world in general and more specific terms, and people join them. This group of participants also pointed out that the children are also having a great time in which there is a lot to learn and to acquire.
3. **Communication.** A questionable role is reserved for the government in particular here. Participants call it downright deception and manipulation in order to implement measures. Within the framework of the reforms around the medical insurance legislation, the equality of every citizen has been the word used most in communication. The physicians, however, think they already know that they can no longer prescribe the care and that inequality can arise once the lower incomes cannot come up with the premiums for the additional insurances. Likewise the reform of the law on disablement is a direct attempt to deprive people of their benefit without immediately providing work in exchange. Study grants have also been gradually cut back. Children of parents with low incomes will have more difficulty getting into universities or will finish their studies with sky-high debts, while living in a world where they will have to take care of the benefits for an increasing number of pensioners.

Within this context other remarks referred to the disappearance of profound investigation journalism. "The truth is no longer what it was; does not matter anymore. Personally I also get away with lies."

4. **Rise in consciousness.** Participants observe an increasing awareness with people that the changes in society should be followed more critically. They build a trust on it that this will result in corrections of rude and incorrect government interference in the past. Others doubt that this will be the case and fear an increase in chaos. They look upon the protest as a local, fragmented and unorganized activity and do not see it as an alternative for institutionalized and organized solidarity which has been lost in the meantime.
5. **Political piece of bungling.** Some participants experience the way the government operates as ignorant and negligent. Numerous measures tumble over one another and are carelessly implemented. The citizen is referred to P.O. Box 51, the Dutch government's centre for public service information, where he or she can obtain all information. Everyone is in such a hurry and there is so little dialogue. Others applaud the firm line taken by the government; there have been discussions for years without any decisions. Finally something is done. Obviously, the democratic bodies will correct the excrescences of the measures.
6. **The focal point on money and profit** organizes continuously and increasingly the social processes. It rules out human perception as information for the arrangement of organizations and cooperation/society of people. Working for ideological organizations is mentioned as an example, which used to be done by enthusiastic volunteers and is now done by young people for money. The principle is so obvious, that the employees can already work out when their company will close down and start cheaper production in another country. Good, dedicated people become depressed and discouraged. Someone else will draw inspiration

from this situation, in which you can take your own responsibility and create your own opportunities.

- 7. Religion as a political instrument.** Religion is put back on the social-welfare agenda. What does religion mean in human contact (the debate on standards and values)? It also includes an analysis about the way in which religion functions in our society. Moreover it is noticeable that there are many ways in which people organize themselves and pay attention to a spiritual life; by talking about it, praying together or through meditation. On the other hand there is the possibility of religion being abused as a legitimization for conservative politics.

Part 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS

In this part of the Listening Post, based on parts 1 and 2, the participants collectively try and name the currently underlying conscious or subconscious dynamics of what goes on in the world and to come to hypotheses in relation to what is happening right now. The participants are now more involved in what you could call 'the internal world'. On the one hand their collective ideas and thoughts determine how they experience the external reality and on the other hand they determine their actions towards that external world.

It was not easy for the participants to work out a hypothesis systematically into detail. Partly matters were repeated that had come up during the theme discussions, but gradually the following arose:

Analysis and hypothesis 1

Analysis:

The processes we call globalization continue. To many people this process is intangible and incomprehensible. What comes across and stays are statements about moving work and the shifting of political balances of power between Europe, the U.S.A., Russia, China, India and the Middle East with energy sources serving as a weapon of power. Employees in enterprises are told that inferior and too expensive work will inevitably lead to losing jobs to the Chinese or East Europeans. Disappointment, fear and aversion to the people in those areas that take over the jobs, is strongest especially in these groups when the jobs disappear after all. Declining trust in the reliability of employers and cynicism among a growing number of employees is the price that is paid..

However, it is also apparent that there are groups of people that learn to play a part in globalisation. Through their work and voluntary work or through a home abroad, they come into contact with other cultures. Mutual communication leads to a more profound realization of global society and the awareness that the Netherlands is "just" a country, not a bad one for that matter, where you can live as well, though not necessarily have to be for a meaningful and inspirational living (together). Often those who participate in debating groups are people who make it their purpose to interpret society or who are a part of networks that look for meaningful (international) activities.

Hypothesis:

Perhaps the meaning of the national society diminishes in favour of the global connection. It might well be that we are set the task to learn to deal with one another

on a global level. The demands made by the other parts in the world to have a 'fair share' of the possibilities which life has to offer, seems to coincide with the free market doctrine which rules the exchange processes of consumer goods.

Likewise it seems that a dichotomy threatens to arise in society. On the one hand there is a group of people capable of acquiring a meaningful position for themselves in this transition phase through (volunteer) work and networking. A position that allows 'surveying the world by being able to do something in it' by means of which it is able to inspire itself and to take action. On the other hand a group that loyally finishes the work that has to be done until it disappears. A group that rather runs the risk of becoming cynical and that will hold others responsible for their inconvenience. Possibly, it will also turn into a group that is not understood. A group that is accused of lack of entrepreneurship and even idleness, but that is actually being dismissed, abandoned and neglected.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis:

In line with the analysis of globalization: the debate about the European unification was not held or was too late anyway. The European legislation was served to the population who refused to eat. It was not possible to link it to their world of daily (threatened) jobs, of price levels of consumer goods being pushed up by the Euro and of social contacts close to home, to the inspired and enterprising legislators in Brussels and their political old boys' network in Europe. The government tried to seduce the citizens into voting in favour of the constitution, yet failed. Legislation on a European level is now well under way and a return to the old way is virtually impossible.

In the name of Europe or of competitiveness denationalization is (not very successfully) implemented; the income position of various groups in society is deteriorated, of some even substantially so. The terms of employment are getting worse, pensions are reduced, people are expected to work longer, because, as they say, life expectancy is increasing and the young cannot bear the costs of the future. The price for suffering from ill health or being unfit for work comes down on the citizen more and more. People are expected to take care of themselves to a larger extent. The majority of the population, including the politicians themselves, state that the government is incompetent.

Hypothesis:

It seems as if the government has not made a sufficient effort to immerse into the position of the 'common' citizen, to whom abroad is what he experiences when he is on holiday. They have let opportunities go by to visualize (in time) which valuable elements are embedded in the European unification: Safety, freedom and opportunities for experiences with new forms of cooperation. Because of this and their attempts to persuade the citizen by means of alluring and misleading communication to vote in favour of the constitution, the government and politics have lost credit. It has increased the gap between the government and the citizen. At the same time it is possible that the European government will correct the national government in case they take unreasonable measures against their citizens. Consider the confusion surrounding denationalization, legislation regarding medical expenses, pensions and the like.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3.

Analysis:

For a long time the Netherlands thought that everything was finished. We thought we had fixed up most things nicely; supported by jealous glances from abroad looking at our 'polder dialogues'. As a result of this ontological position we seem to have lost sight of our achievements, the luxury we achieved until well into the nineties. It seemed to be the most natural thing that this would be available to everyone for all eternity. Social abuses were ignored or concern for it was casually pushed aside to the police, child and adolescent welfare, psychiatry etc. This resulted in a kind of 'collective mental and organizational atrophy' concerning problematic social-welfare issues suddenly put on the agenda: as our relation to religion and its role in society. All of a sudden we 'discover' that there is also a political party in this country that does not admit women; that we too have religious groups where people wear head gear; that the church is officially separated from the state, but is still exploited when possible; and that people with a different religion (the immigrants) are suspicious.

We are less competent in handling dialogue than we thought we were and there are possibilities for a government screaming 'zero-tolerance', that highlight the legislation around arrest, the obligation to carry ID papers, camera surveillance and wire tapping, but also word their answers in numerous bureaucratic procedures for police, education, health care etc. to face the abuses.

Hypothesis:

Is it possible that we in the Netherlands first have to experience how self-satisfied we have become by being forced to take a step down? Can the dialogue with the government be re-established through a profoundly felt injustice which will lead to an authentic protest? Are we on the verge of letting this happen, will we witness organized solidarity once again or is it still a long time coming? Will it lead to a desired adjustment or to a tougher position of the government and then indeed to authentic yet more destructive and society disruptive actions? Could it be that the discussions about religion, headscarves and the like, show how difficult it is for us to deal with people with different views of life and different lifestyles? Could it be that we should also take a look at the separation between church and state, although we assumed that we had it well organized? Could it be that as a society we should practice again going over these questions; perhaps by paying a high price: learning the hard way both personally and socially as is the case in other countries? Or do we believe that the democratic bodies are that solid that it will take some sweat, but no blood?

Convener: John Scheenen and Joop Westgeest