

**"Ireland and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 10th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

There was little initial connection or association between themes. The first member to speak raised the issue of junk food, rising obesity, children filling themselves constantly with food. Another member spoke about feelings to do with the start of the year: comings and goings of family and friends over Christmas, a sense of uncertainty. A member spoke of feeling like that her work role was like an elastic band in a figure 8 - under stress, being challenged, really vibrating but with opportunities. A member reported being abroad for Christmas and missing the normal marking of the end of the year and the start of another year.

There was a reflection on the difference between public perception (media presentation) and personal experience of life in Ireland. The experience of coming back to Ireland and Dublin with new eyes led to a reflection that Dublin - Ireland - was not that bad, that traffic was manageable, that the health service was good and that it worked.

It is important to hold onto 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' - we behave as though we have to criticise one thing in order to praise something else. It's difficult to recognise *both* that the 'Celtic Tiger' (our economic miracle) is a good thing *and* that we are fearful that we are losing our capacity to care - for the elderly, the sick, the poor. We are guilty about having and less confident in our goodness.

But questions too about whether structural improvements had led to an improvement in quality of life. There was association to the idea that 'people do not realise the power of 1' - that people don't realise how much influence and power they have individually. This idea recurred throughout the sharing of ideas, apparently in response to any exploration of loss of control. The habit of complaining about what is wrong more than acknowledging what is good was noted.

A theme emerged around the idea of finding a 'reference point', a way of grounding the self in the midst of change, a right balance between what is demanded and what is important. There was a recognition that the process of keeping grounded, with a focus on what is really important, is a continual process.

Another theme was that of 'too much' in contrast to 'enough'. The lull at this time of year is a relief after the excess of Christmas. The feeling that 'too much' leads to 'not enough'. When there is less of the mad frenzy, something richer happens. This is experienced both by individuals and also by Ireland as a country - we have gone from 'too little' to 'too much' very quickly and have 'not enough' as a result. It was observed that there is freedom in having less and that it is good to manage without so much. Having gone from one to the other quite quickly, we have to decide for ourselves what 'enough' is now - we have to set limits for ourselves. We are growing up, as a society - we were in adolescence and making mistakes, we don't have the security that comes from affluence. In the past, the church provided certainty and authority. We have rejected this, but we demand certainty and authority elsewhere - from politicians. In our post-colonial society, we are not comfortable with taking individual responsibility. Parallels with the experience of being a parent - there is more respect, more trust in parent/child relationships. Are children today more open? Nobody ever listened to their parents!

The experience, the celebration, the excess of Christmas was mentioned by several members. The sight of Christmas lights this year prompted questions about how long we will be able to continue to enjoy lights - what are the environmental implications? There was a sense of a dampening down of joy. The weather was so mild, it didn't even feel like winter, it was missing the atmosphere of Christmas. Whole segment of society not 'buying into' Christmas. Yet spending broke all records. Some public spaces did not have a crib, but did have a Christmas tree. There is some confusion about how to respect diversity, but an acknowledgement that we can't continue as we used to, that we are living in a very changed social space. There were questions of fitting into a more diverse culture.

Members explored the contrast between the willingness of young people to carry massive debt, to take on huge mortgages and to be marketed to so completely. Members questioned whether this was necessarily bad, or just different. Members wondered how this related to the international news, to the increasingly dangerous, chaotic and out of control world. How does the international news affect us? The execution of Saddam Hussein and its circulation through the internet was considered in terms of revenge. Ordinary human reactions to these images, and the reality that this was a human being, a husband and father, were denied. The role of the media in presenting us with goodies and baddies - simple stereotypes - was explored. We are not able to tolerate ambiguity - there is a value placed on certainty that contradicts our experience of the way things are. We demand certainty and are not allowed to say that we don't know. It takes a lot more energy to hold a both/and position - it is easier and more comfortable to be black and white.

The sustainability of life, of the environment and of our way of life and costly way of using earth's resources, was explored. It is hard to maintain a positive outlook. As a society, it is hard to have a conversation and feel uplifted by it. Global warming and technological threat are very real. The challenges to the human race that have to be addressed by us collectively. It is hopeful that we know we have to do it collectively. Do we know this? A growing awareness of the responsibility to do something about these threats and a conviction that we have the capacity to solve these problems. We react to the feeling that we have no control over these changes - we need to find controls again - for technology, for the environment.

A member raised the question of a changed and changing morality. Does morality mean something different now? Have we shifted in the code of values we live by? Does diversity and multiculturalism mean that everything is all right now? Have we lost our own sense of right and wrong and what does this loss mean to me as an individual? In the past, we accommodated difference in a different way. Size matters: it feels like, as a society, we have become so huge and diverse - what worked when we were small and homogeneous no longer works.

Looking forward, members spoke about uncertainty for future generations but also the sense of missing a map for the future for ourselves. There are questions about whether my past experience will serve me well in the unknown future - will it be enough? Where will technology go? Members spoke of being unsure at this age and stage of life, of being more aware of services for older people, or being more conscious of not having children. In parallel, members spoke of an older stage of life generating freedom from the responsibilities of earlier stages, so that now we have no excuse. We are confused about aging - people are more active for longer yet ordinary old age is not valued. The wisdom of age has no currency.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Several themes identified by members have been distilled into four major themes:

1. The difficulty of being grounded in a continually shifting arena

The start of the year: comings and goings of family and friends over Christmas, the disturbance and hype of the activity of the holidays was a metaphor for a sense of uncertainty about the present and the future. So many familiar things are changing beyond recognition: the icons and artefacts of our society, in response to rapidly increasing diversity; moral certainties of the past are challenged by new and different cultural and faith perspectives; ways of connecting and relating in a small and stable society don't work in a global, networked, fast-paced world. Developments we wished for and welcomed - technological advances, increased industry, large cities - produce unanticipated, uncontrollable and potentially devastating effects. Individually, we find ourselves aging and not equipped to enter this unknown and unfamiliar part of our lives. The older one gets the more aware one is of our need for others. How do we care for older people? Who will look after me? How do we reconnect with each other? A theme emerged around the idea of finding a 'reference point', a way of grounding the self in the midst of change, a right balance between what is demanded and what is important. There was a recognition that the process of keeping grounded, with a focus on what is really important, is a continual process. The resistance to the fear associated with loss of control was expressed in the repeated assertion of 'the power of 1'.

2. Consuming too much

We are preoccupied with consuming. Christmas was an orgy of excess consumption. We are increasingly worried about the damage resulting from junk food, rising obesity, children filling themselves constantly with food. We look at a generation who have been marketed to all their lives and who now 'consume' all that is new, different, cool. This casual consumption and disposable society is very different - but is it necessarily worse? More consumption is not giving rise to more satisfaction. There is a sense that such rampant consumption is an effort to satisfy some need which remains unfulfilled. 'Too much' leads to 'not enough'. As a country we have gone from 'too little' to 'too much' very

quickly and have 'not enough' as a result. Having gone from one to the other quite quickly, we have to decide for ourselves what 'enough' is now - we have to set limits for ourselves. We are growing up, as a society - we were in adolescence and making mistakes, we don't have the security that comes from affluence. In the past, the church provided certainty and authority. We have rejected this, but we demand certainty and authority elsewhere - from politicians.

3. Global warming, climate change and technology are out of control

The excess of Christmas prompted questions about how long we will be able to continue to enjoy such excess in every form. What are the environmental implications? What are the personal and societal costs? We are concerned with questions about the sustainability of life, of the environment and of our way of life and costly way of using earth's resources. Where will technology go? Members spoke of being unsure at this age and stage of life, of being more aware of services for older people, or being more conscious of not having children. In parallel, members spoke of an older stage of life generating freedom from the responsibilities of earlier stages, so that now we have no excuse for not acting and taking personal responsibility. The challenges to the human race have to be addressed by us collectively. It is hopeful that we know we have to do it collectively. There is a growing awareness of the responsibility to do something about these threats and a conviction that we have the capacity to solve these problems. We react to the feeling that we have no control over these changes - we need to find controls again - for technology, for the environment.

4. Polarising of ideas - black and white; goody and baddie

We notice the prevalence of polarised and simplistic representations of the world in our media and public discourse (Saddam was evil: Bush is bad). We behave as though we have to criticise one thing in order to praise something else. It's difficult to recognise *both* that the 'Celtic Tiger' (our economic miracle) is a good thing *and* that we are fearful that we are losing our capacity to care - for the elderly, the sick, the poor. We are guilty about having and less confident in our goodness. Ordinary human reactions to the images of Saddam's hanging and the reality that this was a human being, a husband and father, were denied. We are not able to tolerate ambiguity - there is a value placed on certainty that contradicts our experience of the way things are. We demand certainty and are not allowed to say that we don't know, especially in public debate or engagement with citizens. It takes a lot more energy to hold a both/and position - it is easier and more comfortable to be black and white. It is important to hold onto 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members 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 members were 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. It was difficult to stay with the task and hypothesising was tentative and fragmented. There was a return to elaborate the themes. This felt safer and less challenging than the work to discern the underlying meaning.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Complexity

Analysis: Members of the LP see the world as changing so rapidly as to no longer be under control and boundaries between what is inside and outside no longer clear. This stirs up primitive anxieties about 'survival' and influences our relatedness to each other, who we can trust, certainties about our moral and physical landscape and map. We cope by either withdrawing from reality and cutting off from each other or we externalise our anxieties and they get fragmented, split off and disowned. In this way it was suggested that fears about our own self destructiveness are put into climate change and dangerous technology and the warmongering leaders who represent the dangers of closeness and our lack of control. Consumption becomes an act of seeking fulfillment but ultimately leaves us feeling diminished and empty. We act as if we are driven relentlessly in a manic, unthinking way by fear of the unknown which we can't comprehend or control.

Hypothesis: We are filled with anxiety as a result of world events and so by disowning our fears and putting them out there, we don't then need to know about or have to face an increasingly complex and confusing society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Black and White

Analysis: We resist facing the complexity of life and we want to be told that life is simple, that we can always recognise the good and the bad. We both demand and resent the representation of ourselves/others which strips away all ambiguity and nuance and reduces us/them to single dimensions. We feel both failed (by others - politicians, media, authority) and failed (that we are not being more grown-up and mature ourselves). We don't want to think because it is too painful and uncertain.

Hypothesis:

We easily internalise the offered stereotypes of good and bad because we have a wish to avoid our capacity to acknowledge complexity and ambiguity. This can lead to forgetting or ridding ourselves of our own capacity for balanced views based on experience and mindfulness.

Analysis & Hypothesis 3

Fear of ourselves

Analysis: We observe our response to personal and societal wealth and the increased diversity of our society. We are uncomfortable with our own selfish behaviour. We are uncertain about the security of our own values in the face of a diversity of values. We recognise unacceptable de-humanising behaviour and the de-valuing of age, wisdom and tradition. We are unsure about where we are, where we are going, whether we are equipped to travel safely and not proud of what we have become. We are 'called to doubt what we thought was our integrity and goodness'.

Hypothesis: Toleration can be espoused as a dominant value because we wish to avoid taking authority and creating dependency upon our failed leadership. We see parallels between our own shaky morality and the possibly violent ruthless narcissism of others.

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