

"Ireland and the World at the Dawn of 2008"



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF 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'

The first member to speak expressed concern about her adolescents, who had spent holidays engaged in playing a board game called 'Risk'. Other members associated to this, speaking of the apparent refusal of young adults to mature or grow up, of a refusal to engage with the world and of their demotivation. Another member contrasted the 'easy' circumstances of the lives of her children with those of her grandparents, who had to leave Ireland and who experienced the World Wars. Members questioned the affect of having things so easy and expressed concern that our children are not ready for any kind of struggle in their lives. Contrasting teenagers playing 'Risk' in a safe environment, a member spoke about the Irish teenager who is missing in Spain: who was taking care of her, why had she not been in school for 2 years, who was responsible, what are we responsible for? The relative lack of interest in the fate of this girl was contrasted with the huge interest in Madeleine McCann. Have we forgotten that teenagers still have to be minded and watched?

We questioned what the role of society is in relation to responsibility for children and their safety. This led to a conversation about the public service and the feeling that the public service was 'to blame' for everything: individuals and communities are never to blame. Members were worried about the person who falls between the responsibility of a proliferation of bodies. A member suggested that we have been too competent and that we are really challenged by notions of power, institution and leadership. A member involved in change management felt preoccupied by the idea of legacy: what have we been left? Patriarchal and matriarchal structures? There is something distinctive about our Irish system – the legacy of the church is that we have difficult and ambivalent relationships with power and authority.

And what is our legacy? Will the future be better? The authorities of the past have been challenged and we are in that space now. We have moved from things not changing at all to a total instability of constant change, from old certainties to new unknowns. A member referred to a current tribunal investigating political corruption and wondered what we expect of our politicians. The effect of scandals of sex abuse, corrupt politicians, failures of all our institutions has led to a move towards privatising morality, so that morality is an entirely individual practice and understanding.

Increased regulation and interference with our lives in the form of legislation which is framed as protecting the citizen and asserting that 'people matter' – but do they? Health and Safety concerns are much more about not getting sued. Current response to inadequate service is to create new, specialist structures and bodies rather than to strengthen what exists already. Developments are increasingly driven by 'consumer feedback' rather than any clear, coherent sense of direction. While services should be able to hear the experience of people who use the service, they shouldn't rely on the users of the service to give feedback. A member challenged this and asserted that the opportunity to speak is valuable to those right at the margins of our society and that their voices are often not heard.

There is a sense that we are preoccupied with 'pretend' risk, and not able to accept or tolerate the reality that there are situations where there is risk. In relation to people at risk, what gets attacked may not be the real issue. Perhaps our outrage and amplified anger at – perhaps not all that significant – corruption is in because there is no medium for our anger at more fundamental concerns. Members expressed disappointment with the media, who are now creating news rather than analysing news.

A member who had worked outside Ireland and then returned noticed how unquestioningly we seem to have taken on the American work ethic – long, hard hours and very individualistic in our concerns and interests.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

'In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1'. Members identified key themes relatively quickly and easily.

The first theme identified was the **locus of responsibility**, with reference to our uncertainty about who is now responsible for what. An increased demand to know who to blame exists alongside an increased reluctance to take personal responsibility. **Anxiety about the future** was a strong theme. We feel this anxiety in relation to others that we feel responsible for – our children, the next generation, our clients & patients, asylum seekers – and also in relation to ourselves. As we age, we take on new roles (caring for an aging parent) for which we have no rehearsal and question if we have the relevant skills and we are also unsure about our personal futures in this changing world.

Members made a connection between the two themes of a **voice** and **displaced anger**. People's voice is linked to the capacity to listen and we fear that we – individually, collectively and as society – are less good at listening now. When we don't experience ourselves as heard, we find other vehicles for our anger and frustration. A sub-theme of **emotional expression** identified the damaging effects of the absence of meaningful ways to share our feelings and noticed the many ways that adolescents find to articulate unspeakable emotions.

The theme of **public vs private**, in relation to physical and psychological spaces and in relation to morality was seen as placing these two perspectives in tension. Public and private have come to seem somehow in opposition, instead of as related and complementary dimensions.

Members identified a theme around the tendency to 'add-on' rather than develop, so instead of strengthening and enhancing what exists, we separate, disconnect and over-bound pieces which should connect and integrate. This is evident in the development of public services, in the organisation of civil society and in increased regulation and

legislation. It leads to a proliferation of bodies, authorities, structures which are increasingly difficult to negotiate and which dilute rather than strengthen the sense of containment and safety. The EU amplifies this tendency, with our collusion.

Other themes included a question about **what we have become** and the concern about this environment of **rapid change leading to less stability** for all of us.

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 disconnected.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Anxiety about the Future

Analysis: Members identified the range of ways in which anxiety about the future was expressed during the evening. Members wondered if the anxiety was that the future will be more like the past or less like the past and more unknown. The question was raised whether the expressed anxiety for and about our offspring was really a front for our anxiety about ourselves and our own futures, about the personal change, life cycle changes which we are facing? A member wondered if the contrasting of this strange present and the unknown future with the known past was a grasping at familiarity – a way of making the unknown familiar. The fear of the unknown future was spelled out as the fear of being locked in – to limited and restricted frames, resources and spaces – or being locked out – from life and the new, with all its risk and possibility.

Members viewed this fear as essentially about future safety and an uncertainty that the world of the young, fit and able will accommodate the aging. This leads us to think about dependency and not knowing what we can put our faith in now. A member reminded us of the recent, high-profile death of a young Irish 'celebrity' and we wondered if she reflected a fantasy of a young, beautiful, -can-do' culture which is the new Ireland or a neglected, immature woman-child with no capacity to manage real risk. We noted that beneath an apparent coherence, there is the potential for complete disunity in society.

Hypothesis: We are an old-fashioned people that belong to an adolescent nation expecting things to go wrong. Because of rapid, continuous and widespread change, we as society are unsure where we fit anymore. We experience this as disintegration. Our reaction to this is on the one hand a withdrawal into private and individual spaces – a withdrawal from real risk which comes with connection – and the fantasy that we can create and control our individual and private worlds and on the other hand an increased wish for and fear of dependency. Since we all experience this, no-one is able to take responsibility for others. We project our dreams of completeness, wholeness and safety onto idealised people and this results in envious attacks.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Displaced Anger

Analysis: Members identified the frustration felt when decisions are made more and more remotely and when it is difficult or impossible to be listened to or heard by those making decisions about our lives. Members thought that the absence of a voice and the difficulty of expressing our thoughts and feelings about what matters leads to an exaggerated sense and expression of outrage in a setting where we are invited or allowed to express an opinion. So public interest and outrage at the work of inquiring into political corruption feels both real and misplaced. The Gaelic Athletic Association [a parish-based, voluntary organisation] is enacting displaced anger, with 2 sides fighting battles in public. This is seen as another containing institution which is fragmenting and failing to hold. There is a sense that we are angry that our recent success as a nation (Ireland.inc – the Celtic Tiger) has left us still dissatisfied, even though we have things we never had before, so we find things to criticise about our success. We are angry that success has still left people behind and Ireland is more unequal than ever. We are angry that we tried to kick off the legacy of the past – we behave the opposite to our parents – but have we left a legacy that is any better?

There was reference to the media and the absence of analysis – a sense that the journalists created news rather than analysing it. There was a sense that we are manipulated as information is presented in biased ways. Are we whipped into a frenzy of anger by the ways in which we are kept in the dark or by the ways in which information is presented to us? A member thought that this was a bleak analysis and that we had to remember that things were not black and white, as they are presented, but full of grey and that we have to find ways to live with the grey and accept that things are both good and bad.

Hypothesis: Because of the disintegration referred to in the hypothesis above, members of society experience anxiety. Anger is a response to this anxiety and we seek vehicles for the 'legitimate' expression of outrage and anger. We are presented with black and white, bad and good objects, villains and heroes and these are exaggerated so that we cannot see social objects as containing and expressing both good and bad. Despite our lived experience of the potential for both good and bad in all contexts, we view a whole range of social objects as either idealized or experienced as frightening and threatening.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Safety and Risk

Analysis: We are no longer sure how to evaluate risk. The changed environment means that we can't be sure that our experience and skills will enable us to make judgements that are appropriate. We create frameworks that are over protective and ridiculous in order to protect against risk, but they actually are a defence against a refusal to accept any level of risk – there must always be someone to blame. At the same time as constructing these elaborate structures, the evidence is that individuals, families and communities are less capable and secure about how to recognise and manage risk. We allow children and teenagers to take inappropriate risks prematurely, but we refuse to allow or require adults to take responsibility for themselves. So we have adults who won't grow up and children who pretend to be adults. We are unsure whether the lives of the next generation are easier or more difficult than the lives of earlier generations.

Hypothesis: Because of anxiety about safety, members of society hand over more and more authority to public bodies and hold them responsible for safety. We insist on high levels of regulation and control, resulting in reduced personal responsibility, influence and voice.

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