"Switzerland and the World at the Dawn of 2008"

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The main preoccupations were family, community and slow, subtle erosion of Switzerland. There was concern with 'Family' in various forms — a perceived lack of respect for the older generation as well as a discussion about what constitutes the older generation now; a disquiet that people tend to live in one generation within families now and not three as in previous times which can erode the family connections and a concern with falling standards and high expectations of education. There was also a pre-occupation with 'Community' — how this is formed, how we reach out to others and how we integrate both foreigners and locals who move into new communities. There may be an irony in Switzerland that it is easier to integrate as a foreigner than as a local, although this depends on what type of foreigner we are talking about — educated international or impoverished immigrant. There was also discussion about a slow, subtle erosion of Switzerland through falling standards in many everyday goods and services, a prevailing sense of a resistance to change and a feeling that it is very difficult to own up to social problems overtly — such as poverty, psychological or stigmatised health issues. Finally it should be noted that there was an overall sense that Switzerland's issues are those of privilege and good-living in a wealthy country and not those of hardship in a poor struggling nation. This was especially the case for those involved in the Listening Post who represented a privileged cross-section of Swiss society.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

An observation was that it may be impossible to agree on themes as the initial conversation was frequently 'politely contradictory' — almost everything that was stated in a positive light was challenged by an alternative viewpoint highlighting the shadow side. However, there was consensus on the following themes:

1. **Picture Postcard View of Switzerland** — The image of the beautiful clean, Switzerland as seen on picture postcards and chocolate boxes became a metaphor of the country as an idyllic place. This is similar to a theme from last year's Listening Post of 'Switzerland as a Country of Choice'. The images give an impression of unity within Switzerland, yet there is concern that the beautiful serene images mask many differences below the surface such as the discrepancy between rich and poor. There is also an anxiety that current problems such as poverty could become much bigger and that it is extremely difficult to admit to adversity, difficulty or problems in such an idyllic place. It is 'as if' in the fantasy-image of Switzerland it is not permissible to have difficulties.

2. **Diversity** — The group, the range of topics covered and Switzerland were seen to represent diversity. The positive aspect of this diversity is that there is potential

to share best practice and learn from how Switzerland has dealt with this multiplicity of language, peoples and interests that is increasingly evident all over the world with the march of globalisation. The negative aspect is that there is a sense that 'only so much' diversity can be tolerated in Switzerland — one is allowed to be different here, but only to a certain extent. The other negative aspect is that of fragmentation as exemplified in the educational system, which varies in quality and standards from canton to canton, perhaps even from village to village.

3.   **Polarisation** — Youth and Elderly, Quality of Life and Degradation of Quality, the Ease or Pain of Integration. These were all themes in which there were contradictory perspectives. It was said that for some children at school the pressure is enormous, for others that minimal pressure exists. That for elderly people there is a lack of respect and a role only on the sidelines of society or that they are well treated and still an important part of society. For most there was agreement that the quality of life in Switzerland is exceptional, yet there is a concern of a steady erosion of quality standards. For some (perhaps more so for Swiss citizens from different parts of the country) integrating into Swiss society was difficult and for others very easy. It seems that the contrary opinions on all these subjects represented an overall theme of diversity which can lead to fragmentation and polarisation within society.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

The analysis has been distilled into the following 3 inter-related hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: Switzerland as the Picture Post Card. It seems that Switzerland is a mini paradise whether looked at from within or outside the country. It is beautiful, clean, well-organised and safe, with outstanding nature and a high quality of life. A land of tradition, neutrality and security, money and wealth is what is conveyed on the postcards of immutable mountains and pristine lakes, traditional villages and historic castles. It is interesting to consider how the values of Switzerland are unconsciously symbolised in these postcard images with perhaps the mountains expressing *it's unchanging nature,* the lakes representing exquisite natural beauty and *the obligation not to spoil (change) things resulting in many rules and regulations* and the old buildings portraying *a desire to preserve history.* Finally, Switzerland's flag symbolises neutrality especially as it was inverted in colour and adopted by the neutral international aid organisation the Red Cross. The images of cheese and chocolate give the country a friendly appealing wholesome PR face and perhaps serve to mitigate the dullness of stubbornly holding onto the past. An interesting question raised was which images would be on the postcards of Switzerland's shadow side? An astute observation was made that postcards are often "kept" and "hung onto" thereby gathering dust. However, if Switzerland is used as a platform to initiate positive change, within as well as abroad at different levels — e.g. socially responsible businesses, NGO start-ups or community initiatives — then these initiatives can probably be initiated more easily here than from countries that are less privileged. And this serves to keep the postcard attractive and vital.

Hypothesis: The post card image has a rosy glow to it — wholesome, idyllic and traditional. Yet there is little expression of difficulties, tensions or the downsides of diversity in the postcards. This dark stuff therefore has to be projected outside to other

countries — those which deal with floods of immigrants, unemployment, riots, racial, religious and cultural tensions, gay marriages. It is as if Switzerland lives in an idealised fantasy that it is as perfect as the postcards portray. And perhaps our childlike wish that it really is this way is a defence against the rapid technological and societal change which can be so overwhelming and leave us feeling inadequate or isolated, so we buy into the beautiful postcard view of the country. And we wish it to stay this way — we are glad that we are 'in' and silently condone the quotas and regulations which keep the floods of immigrants and associated difficulties 'out' for this preserves our own place in the paradise. It is as if we wish for a one way mirror which only shows the positive side of the country (the postcard view of reality) and keeps us blind to the problems here and keeps out the issues that we see other countries struggle with. Perhaps we are like the wicked queen in Snow White asking for the same answer over and over again to the question; 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the fairest country of them all?' Like her perhaps we have a need for continuous re-assurance in the face of enormous uncertainty and change. Very close to the surface of a good life is a huge sense of fragility, of the precariousness of life, as if it could all disappear rapidly.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Switzerland was compared to the tip of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs because basic issues of security, health, education and housing are well covered here. This is an additional way of understanding Switzerland's luxury problems, articulated earlier. If the country has the luxury of being preoccupied with self-actualisation, why might this be a problem? Part of the response is that if the self-actualisation occurs only on an individual level, this will lead to well educated individuals but may do little to help society as a whole. A related response is how do we give back to society? How do we engage in sense making and the creation of meaning within Switzerland and in the world? There is a feeling that perhaps we do not know how to share nor how to take over a more global role and perhaps this is the learning we need to take on so that we do not retreat into individualism nor fall into selfishness.

Hypothesis: Because the majority of people in Switzerland are dealing with issues of privilege, it is as if we are at the top of the mountain (Maslow's Pyramid) after the hard work of the ascent through the different basic needs. There is a feeling that we've made it and deserve to be here, although this feeling may be way more precarious than we let on. We want to stay here and not fall back down nor get pushed off our spot. We don't want to give up or loose our status, economic position and so our selfishness keeps us locked into clutching to the top of the mountain. The underlying drivers of our behaviour are both a selfish pre-occupation with holding onto what we have and hesitancy in reaching out and helping others. The hypothesis is built on a binary way of thinking — we either have it or not — and this can apply equally to material possessions as well as to knowing how to reach out to others. It is as if there is not enough to go around and because of the instability we feel about our situation and about taking on a bigger role, we may cling on to the tip of the iceberg rather than reach out to others.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: A wonderful metaphor of the "Bubble Society" was given to describe the way that many people live in Switzerland. Very closely related to the previous hypothesis, the Bubble society is also concerned with a selfish view of preserving what is ours from outside threat. This Bubble society is partly a result of the decline of families living closely together and is manifested in some of the concerns for elderly people. It is also evident in the breakdown of community living and projects. The Bubble serves to

insulate a family from external forces and to insure that their traditions and way of life continue. For example one participant who has lived for four generations within the same area, stated that his daughter is the only Swiss in her class at school, all other children are foreigners. On the one hand this might be threatening but it does also make it possible for the family to see inside a neighbouring bubble. This is partly the paradox with which Switzerland is grappling — to preserve traditions and to live side by side with foreign ways of life. Hence the Bubble becomes a protective space within which individuals or families can do as they please sheltered from 'too much' diversity. On a macro level Switzerland is like a Bubble within Europe, surrounded as it is by the EU, with pressure to join and conform to European law and yet maintaining an island of privileged protection within. It is perhaps no co-incidence that, in the words of one participant, "everything in Switzerland is insured" — as if even a way of life can be insured against change.

Hypothesis: The Bubble society highlights the independence of people today. One person said it is as if the pendulum has swung from a dependency on parents who had the right to "dictate" what to do to an independence which is fiercely protected. Just as a teenager rebels against their parents, we are perhaps single-mindedly pursuing our independence and have lost touch with the ability to be dependent on others and to have others depend on us. Hence our behaviour becomes self-interested and we loose the ability to reach out for the common good.

The hope for reaching out and joining with others comes from the global environment with concerns for the natural world bringing people out of their ivory towers to help. This highlights a desire to take up a more active role on the global stage to move away from a beautiful but dusty postcard view of Switzerland to a more active, engaged and leveraged platform from which to initiate positive change. The question is whether we can put aside our protective self-interest in order to do so?

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