

**"Canada and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on 7th January



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, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives,' that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was for us to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. The following represents a clustering of at least some of these themes.

1. *The Global Economy*: The discussion began with an expressed concern about the global economy. Everyone agreed that the collapse of the American economy and its consequences elsewhere was the major event of 2008 and that its impact will continue to be felt through 2009. The story was told of a worker in Sardinia whose job included an apartment and a car. When he was let go after 10 years, he became suddenly homeless and had to be taken in by a friend with a spare bedroom. It was also pointed out that the deindustrialization of America, which had been tied to emerging industrial economies in China and South East Asia was not immune to the economic collapse. There have been closures of factories in China after a long period of spectacular economic growth. Some argued that the worst is yet to come. 2008 was like 1929. The deeper Depression occurred after 1930. 2009 will be the beginning of much worse that is yet to come.

There was however disagreement about how severe the impact will be in Canada. Some argued that in 2009 we would not be immune to the severe consequences that were happening throughout the world. Several people noted the greater difficulty in getting credit from banks; one person spoke of a dramatic decrease in the number of houses sold in Canada: she was not alone in the failure to sell her house. She expected that Canada would follow the rest of the world with great increases in joblessness, a further collapse of housing prices and so on. All of this has not been as serious in Canada as elsewhere. A minority argued that our economy remains sound and that just as we have so far escaped the worst consequences of the global meltdown, we would continue to do so in 2009. The forecasts of doom and gloom were seen to be a function of the sensationalist press.

2. *Waiting for Obama:* The election of Obama has emerged from a politics of hope embraced in the USA. Youth and blacks became politically involved in the movement for Obama as was evident even a year ago. Obama has become a global figure and has brought hope for major changes in the nature of the American Empire. Expectations for him are very high all over the world. It was felt by some in the room that he would set a positive and progressive tone that would infect national and international affairs. Others felt that his star has risen so high and expectations are so great that his reputation is a new bubble replacing the credit bubble of recent years. They argued that it is not so clear what Obama will be able to accomplish despite his massive popularity.
3. *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Gaza:* There is an ever-increasing capacity to create unnecessary suffering in the world through advanced weapons systems. The aerial bombardment of Gaza followed by the invasion by Israeli troops was seen as a good example of this and was discussed at some length. There was agreement about the horrific situation in Gaza, and the extreme nature of Israel's military actions. For some the situation was especially painful and it was hard to decide what to think. There was no agreement about the extent to which Israeli action was justified and there was wide disagreement about its consequences.

There was also disagreement about the growing capacity to do harm to others — some argued that in the history of the world there had always been terrifying abilities to do unnecessary harm to others. This event was no great exception.

4. *The Canadian Comedy:* This theme requires some explanation. In Canada the Conservative government almost fell before Christmas as a result of an alliance between the Liberal (Centre) Party and the New Democratic (Left of Centre) Party (NDP). The rush to topple the government and its efforts to stay in power has resulted in a kind of comic quickstep among national politicians who are all dancing to quickly changing tunes. The Conservatives could not decide whether or not the Canadian economy was at risk, and are now more firmly than ever undecided about what to do about it. The Liberal Party has signed an alliance with the NDP, but has deposed its leader and chosen a new one who is not clear about this alliance. The NDP is declaring that the Depression has returned and wants lots of Social action. All its ideas are, of course, now being adopted by the Conservatives who need their support to stay in power.

The discussion of this theme centred on the fact that Steven Harper, the leader of the Conservative government, asked the Queen's representative, the Governor General, to "prorogue" parliament until mid-January. This allowed him to avoid the vote of non-confidence, while retaining all powers of the Prime Minister. No one in Canada had ever heard of this procedure. But everyone knew about pierogies, a Ukrainian dumpling vastly popular in the Prime Minister's home province of Alberta. It seemed as if the Prime Minister was smothering the democratic process using Ukrainian dumplings. This joke marked a general hilarity about the bumbling nature of Canadian politics.

5. *Progress is Possible:* We noted that the election of a black president in the United States marked a change that seemed to be impossible even a few years before. The increase in the possibility of same sex marriage despite the California vote against it, marked a greater tolerance for alternative life styles. The platform of Obama along with the collapse of the economy suggests the possibility of more positive social changes in policies related to health care, education and the

environment. Someone suggested that this was a move towards a benevolent and acceptable American socialism. This positive notion was countered by some fear that these advances might be threatened by the worsening economic conditions – that fear for one's own situation makes one less compassionate towards others and more likely to slow down or reverse social advance.

6. *Rise of Anti-Semitism:* Of specific interest to this group was the apparent rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. There seemed to be a conflation of anti-Israel feelings with anti-Jewish ones and a re-emergence of older prejudices against Jews accompanied by declarations about Jewish conspiracies and Jewish control of the world banking systems. The scandal about Madoff was fuel for this. We noted that there was a widespread assumption that all Jews were pro-Israel and a resulting lack of recognition of the wide variety of views among Jews. These include extremely pro-Israel views as well as strong negative positions, and lots in between. This discussion was especially emotion-laden once it emerged that the entire group was Jewish except for one non-Jewish member who was in fact married to a Jew.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: There were many explanations about the concerns expressed in the room. The talk was especially lively and somewhat disorderly. The discussion about the special Canadian experience both economically and politically was made in relation to what was happening in the USA and the rest of the world. Canada seemed once more to be something of an outlier. It would suffer the consequences of international events in which it was not an active participant. It was felt that Canada should and could take a more active role in world affairs, but we do not seem to have the political skill or will to do this. Similarly there was a discussion about the extent to which we were responsible for our personal economic situations and how much we were victims of forces beyond our control. Here it was felt that we had some responsibility for our own personal economic decisions. This was distinguished from the sense of being victims as Jews against the rising tide of anti-Semitism despite our personal views which were sometimes at odds with the Israeli position.

Hypothesis: The dichotomy between agency and victimhood was an especially loaded underlying issue. The fear of becoming impotent victims of global and other external forces like the rise of anti-semitism is accompanied by the further fear that our capacity for action, like the Israelis' might only result in greater damage and loss.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Through the course of the evening many declared jokingly that it would be impossible to make a coherent report of the evening's events. It was so disorderly that

no clear themes and analyses could emerge. The report would then be a result of the convenor's fantasies and predilections and would not reflect the chaotic nature of the conversation. This report would merely be a fabrication.

Hypothesis: The worry that the group could not perform to an acceptable standard was tied to a concern about its somewhat disorderly nature. This seemed to reflect a fear that through our own incapacities we would be misunderstood and even taken over by dangerous forces represented by the convenor.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: The issue of Leadership played a large part in the discussion. Obama as a leader who models good behaviour, was contrasted with a story about a new leader who closed his doors and was mimicked by everyone else in a previously open-door and sociable work environment. Someone argued that Obama would be the last Great Leader and that leadership would have to be taken over by an increase in collective responsibility. We liked this. In fact it was argued that Obama's leadership was one that enabled others to join together into community-based activity.

Hypothesis: It may be that our unconscious hope was for a Messianic leader who would emerge to lead us to a promised land. It was clear that the convenor would not assume this role for this group of disorderly Jews. The declaration of the end of Leadership as a defining force was therefore both frightening and emancipating. A good time was had by most.

Convener: Sholom Glouberman