"Sweden and the World at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post held on 13th 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

1. Optimizing life

The first theme contained various versions of the fact that one's working life will end eventually. Several participants described how they tried to find a good solution for their life situation with regard to work, children, grandchildren, friends and leisure time. The discussion started with, "When I celebrated my 60th birthday last summer, I felt pressure to leave my job, but I actually don't want to do that." All the participants agreed that they did not want to stop working, and that they had also felt this pressure from their surroundings. They mentioned neighbours and friends travelling to exotic countries, taking up new hobbies, starting a course at the university etc. It was also evident that, "this pressure could be felt even if you are quite satisfied with your solution." One participant commented, "I am now 70 years old and I am going to continue working as long as people want to talk to me."

The discussion turned to what it is one wants to avoid — fixed working hours from 8 am to 5 pm, five weeks holiday or the dependency on others (leaders or administrators who do not know the job) — but it seems that it is rather the "nagging and grumbling about trifles" at many workplaces that is a major negative factor. For one younger participant, however, the question was a non-issue: "I need to work as long as I can as I need to provide for my children and my family."

The balance between pursuing ones own interests and at the same time arguing for better conditions for those who fall outside of the safety net of our society is a dilemma. "Being born during the forties implies that we belong to a privileged group. We are many and our needs can be visible, but it will be very crowded when we get really old, we will probably have to take care of ourselves." So, "maybe the freedom to choose is an illusion — the amount of choices is limited and life is finite. It may be something we have now, but it may be gone in a few years time. We live in the bubble of our time and believe that that is how it works."

2. Freedom to choose — a mixed blessing

The conditions for free choice developed out of the first theme. How much freedom can we as human beings handle and what kind of choices are meaningful for whom was one question? Is it an illusion that one can choose when one is older? Some choices are more important than others. "I can't be bothered with all the alternatives, choices I am being asked about. I have a Telia subscription for my phone, and I am satisfied with that, even if it might be a little more expensive. It works and that is what matters." We can look in the rear-view mirror, but it is hard to know what lies in front of us. We have to live with the consequences of the choices we have made, and make the best of the time we have left. A discussion ensued about how privileged it feels to live in a country like Sweden, especially as a woman. One participant referred to an international report about life conditions in a large number of countries: "We have peace, food, good education, work and we can combine working with caring for our children."

A discussion started about what choices are important? On the one hand we have lived longer and have a perspective with regard to the past and we can imagine the consequences of our choices. On the other the time ahead is shorter than the time that has passed. We can not change the choices we make and try something else, "It is a bit late to apply to the opera ballet school." A question was "how are the people who are young today formed by the choices they make and what will it be like when they have reached our age?" If you are young today you are faced with masses of choices, such as what school to apply to, what system for retirement pension to choose etc. It is demanding to make decisions, you are dependent on counsellors and you do not know if they are good or bad. There are no safe choices; it all depends on you. And everything goes much faster today, with new technology, economy, globalization etc. "Growing up today means facing a very different world compared to the one we grow up with." But to learn to make choices when you are a child is something you appreciate when you grow up, as reported by one participant who spoke about her daughter. Owing to the fact that the family had lived on a very tight budget: "It was necessary to make choices and to realize that you don't need everything you would like to have."

3. Generation shifts and generativity

Is the increasing amount of knowledge that is available of any real use and is the knowledge that we, as the older generation, have of any use? Those were the two questions that started the third theme. You can find information about almost anything on the Internet, and there is a demand for a deeper understanding of social phenomena; leaders want to have coaching, work groups want team building and it is now at least fairly OK to be in psychotherapy. The importance of social relations is accepted in many areas of our society. But somehow, the feeling in the group was that something is basically wrong and does not work, although a lot of things in society have improved over time, e.g. the amount of knowledge that is available, the standard of living etc. "I thought it would change for the better, but it seems very doubtful — is the knowledge we have and the experiences we have gained of no value for others? Could we have managed the exchange of e.g. tacit knowledge differently somehow." "However, the need for older persons seems to have changed lately, there is, for instance, an agency for 55+ that is very much in demand." The word age discrimination is not mentioned, but the phenomena could be felt as an important part of this theme.

Then the discussion turned over to violence in society and that young persons are more exposed than older persons and boys more than girls. "In our country we have now many persons (not only immigrants) who have grown up with violence as their only way of defending themselves, and who react with violence as the only way to handle a boss

they dislike for instance." Then the talk turned towards the increased amount of violence toward small children and babies. Parents who cannot cope with their frustration shake their babies, they shout and threaten them. Various difficulties in containing frustration and anxiety, both on a personal and on a societal level, were described.

A constant underlying theme was that existential questions are more in the foreground for more privileged groups of persons, while at the same time survival and maintenance of standard of living are becoming more acute and problematic for a growing number of individuals. The society as a social system, where different subsystems tend drift apart, almost on the boundary to fragmentation is a reality, but is very hard to deal with both on a conscious and an unconscious level. The international economic crises was mentioned, but without any personal anxiety. The fighting in Gaza was not mentioned, although it had dominated the newspapers for the past three weeks. The violent riots during Christmas in suburbs dominated by young immigrants in the south of Sweden were also absent from the discussions. It is as if the participants had not been personally touched by these events, which can be seen as a massive denial of a lot of very destructive and worrying social processes. The recurrent attacks directed at schools involving setting fires and communication through throwing stones and shooting were mentioned but not commented on at any length.

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

*Do we belong to the same society — those
who can make choices and those who cannot?*

Analysis: The realization that this group of participants feel rather privileged can be traced through comments about the need for their own networks in order to achieve justice or get help. It could be perceived that society is on its way towards corruption and fragmentation, but no such fear is discernable. Society could be seen to be divided between those who can make choices and those who can-not. Another underlying fear could be that there is blatant discrimination with regard to age; but this group still feels they are both needed and wanted, but for how long is an open question. The freedom to make choices and the apparent endless possibilities for a section of the population can be interpreted as a massive denial of the fact that at the same time there is a growing part of the population faced with a constantly decreasing number of choices. It seems as if the continuing dismantling of the welfare state system has not yet touched this fairly affluent group of people to any great extent. The illusion that young people have the freedom to make choices seems based on the notion of that a large group of young people leaving school without being able to read and write, without any possibilities to join the welfare state system in a constructive way, are left out, and may become outsiders or engage in criminal activity.

Irritation was expressed about persons who complain about trivialities and do not do anything about them, although they probably could do something. These were compared to those who really have become alienated from working life, e.g. persons who suffer from the new rules and regulations linked to health insurance, which exclude a large number of persons who are unable to work. Those who really are in need and suffer do not complain. They have no voice in the general debate and they can not be heard. A desire to help was expressed, but the participants experienced a strong sense of powerlessness related to a sense of total inability to confront a strong state apparatus one neither understands nor can influence. There is a tendency to idealize silent, patient suffering compared to complaints about trifles. The initial preoccupation of the possibility of stop working, mainly because of pressure from outside (media and individual persons in the neighbourhood) could be interpreted in terms of a massive denial of the fact that we are rapidly approaching a period of mass unemployment that we have not experienced since the 1930s. The international economic crises was mentioned, but without any strong personal links.

Hypothesis: It is as if one does not want to think that it is as bad as it looks. When indignation is demonstrated it is related to betrayed ideals, a de-humanization and lack of ethics and even a distinct lack of skills and knowledge in health care, child care and education, which are some areas that were mentioned. It is, however, not related to the risk for segregation and increased poverty that this might lead to also for the group the participants represent with regard to lifestyle and security. It is as if Margaret Thatcher´s old claim that 'there is no such thing as a society' has turned into a living reality also for people with a different political opinion.

Bion's concept 'attacks on linking' could perhaps be applied to this, in order to get some kind of understanding. It is as if every reminder of the surrounding society is so provoking that it is attacked. What is being challenged is perhaps the thought that we are all citizens in the same society — both the more privileged and the extremely underprivileged.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Forms for political influence do not work —
a self-centred attitude is developing

Analysis: How to engage people, especially young persons, politically and how can they get a sense of being able to exert some influence in a positive way was discussed. The complexity of globalization, international cooperation and contradictions in the world is unbelievable. It is stated that the financial crisis has created endless problems for many, but "the phenomena we experience are so overwhelming that you do not know where to turn or what to do. It shows how fragile everything is, and you tend to look after your own family and hope that they can manage." "It makes you feel small and hopeless and you don't trust the way large groups of people make decisions."

The word violence is only used in connection with situations where you want to harm others through abuse. Structural violence is mainly discussed in relation to small groups of people. The perpetrators could probably also be found in affluent groups, and academics might even be overrepresented. Sources of frustration and anxiety in one's role as parent are, for example, when a mutual agreement related to time schedules in a preschool setting is terminated unilaterally by the school. It is then taken for granted that the parents will solve this problem themselves at very short notice while still maintaining their other roles. Even here the illusion about a society is spread, where

idle relatives (mainly women) queue up in order to take on the responsibility for taking care of a mother that is very ill for four years, as described by one participant.

Obama's leadership — that he actually was elected gives a hope about something new — but in what way is not clear. This hope seems to be of the same kind that resulted in the election success. The important thing about Obama is charisma, youth, personal history and talent, not what he has pledged to do, or that his campaign was the most expensive in history so far.

Hypothesis: A suggestion: The forms for political activity are experienced as foreign. It is not reasonable to be a street activist and one does not want to work with the conventional forms for politics, with meetings, representation and experience the increasing distance between politicians and voters. People feel small and insignificant and without any hope of contributing to any change. Politics is increasingly seen as an area for experts and marketing people or becomes a temporary discussion about a current issue. Underneath this there might be an experience of being alone and of privatization of many societal issues. Not succeeding is understood more in terms of individual failure than as an effect of an iniquitous system — young persons often talk about their fear of being a 'loser'. The pupil is always worse than the school.

This ideological individual centring contributes heavily to scepticism about community-based model declarations, which are often supported by psychology, media and social services. The classic social movements are decreasing and exchanged for temporary networks, which sometimes can result in large and rapid changes, but seldom manage to establish themselves as resistant influential institutions. The comments about Obama point to the possibility that politics may, to a certain extent, take over the role of religion as the bearer of hope and change. Furthermore, the boundary between the roles of political leader and saviour are significantly perforated, and the risks implied in this will not be given attention.

Conveners: Siv Boalt Boëthius and Peter Hugo