

"Belgium (Flanders) and the World at the Dawn of 2010"

Report of a Listening Post
held on 6th 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.

For about one hour the participants shared their experiences and concerns. Many talk about the world we are confronted with now, our responsibility and the legacy we leave behind for our children. The issue of **climate change** is raised and the inability of the world to move forward and transcend differences and contradictions. How to reconcile individual and collective interests? Feelings of powerlessness emerge as well as a strong desire to do something and the conviction that a radical change of mentality is required. There is some difference between people feeling the increase of **contradictions and polarization** in society, and people seeing a lot of **commitment and concern** in their environment. Feelings of loss and reducing our standard of living are shared and the observation that our individualistic mentality is getting in the way of making a first step on an individual level. Someone points out that collective action is made up of individuals taking action.

We talk about the **young generation**, our children, and the way they seem to respond to our society today. Some observe a greater sense of connection among young people, supported by social networks (e.g. Facebook). Some stress the cultural belief or **illusion of 'manipulability'** and the enormous **responsibility** this places on the shoulders of young people. They are made responsible for their own life and for making the right (or wrong) choices! At the same time young people seem to have much more options today, making it even harder to make the 'right' choice. One father notices that young people on the one hand have the world at their fingertips, and on the other hand don't have a good view of what the world outside our western world is really like. Young people move from one country to another, but they don't really 'travel'. Having this 'local' and narrow view could be linked to the overflow of information and the need to protect oneself from being overwhelmed. Someone points at the difference between getting (too much) information on a silver plate, and the lack of motivation to find the 'real' information.

People are struggling with the question: what can I do in my little world to make a contribution? **Is there a readiness to really change things?** Nobody wants to go backwards. In that respect we, here in this Listening Post, are not a representative group! Those who have little, will certainly not be prepared to make a step backward.

One participant fears only a severe 'shock' will make us move into action. History seems to say that **only gigantic conflicts can make change happen**. Hopefully we have learned to do it differently now. A member of the group mentions that Al Qaida is hardly ever linked to poverty issues. The dialogue then moves to Europe, how it was initiated after a big conflict. Someone points out that Europe is the result of continuous, small efforts of many people. Today the problem of our climate is the main issue we need to tackle without conflict or war. We cannot assume history will repeat itself. Someone reminds us that during the war there was a lot of solidarity. A strong reaction is: I'd rather have *no* war and *no* solidarity! This person heard her parents talk about how they helped the Jewish community in Antwerp during the Second World War. No more of that.

There is also a strong awareness that we find ourselves in a luxury position and that **the gap between rich and poor is getting wider**. One participant fears we might end up like a small Switzerland, a fortified country with old, rich people. A main theme in the conversation is that because we have so much, we also have a **great deal to lose**. Many in society seem to be focused on safety, out of fear to lose a lot. This takes away action and makes us passive. For how long will we be the 'rich countries?' New, potential conflicts seem to be emerging.

A participant stresses the horrible fact that today many organizations (temporary employment agencies) **earn money on the back of those who lose their jobs**. If this tendency continues and another 100,000 extra people are unemployed, this system will fail. We cannot compete with countries with much lower wages. Newspapers only seem to report about shareholders losing money; little is said about the growing number of unemployed.

It is **no longer helpful to think in terms of 'good' and 'bad'**; still we do it all the time. When you judge, you create aggression. That must be cleared first. Most participants agree but also acknowledge how difficult it is to let go of our judgement and prejudice. One participant gives the example of teachers; how hard it is to teach them to observe without any bias. This brings the conversation to the need to **learn new mechanisms for dialogue and discussion** in order to prevent conflict. Even on a world wide scale (e.g. Copenhagen). Participants wonder: have we learned anything from the situation in Iraq and how it was handled? One participant brings in three issues that seemed impossible when she was a young woman: the fall of the Berlin wall, getting rid of Apartheid and federalism in Flanders. All three have happened, without any war. We do seem to learn something from history. There is a concern in the group: **are we learning fast enough?** The conclusion is: we cannot change faster than we can. Mediation, for instance, is growing in popularity today. People seem to realize there is no other way if we want sustainable relationships and solutions. We are waking up from the illusion that it is all about 'me' and 'my part' to which I think I am entitled. There is also a lot of win-lose going on, but that is not a solution.

A final contribution is around **our society losing a central story to connect its citizens**. We made a move from the pulpit to the market, from the confessional box to the therapist. The new story that could connect us is the **ecological crisis**. Young people are exposed to a lot of temptations and are receiving many impulses. It is a free market! We are a society with no war, we have a good social system, but the inspiration and soul behind it all is missing. The participant talks about a story she heard of a young Moroccan criminal who came to Belgium when he was 7 years old. What struck him was that people here don't laugh. Our generation was involved with psychological issues: divorce, education. The next one may be the generation dealing with **spiritual issues, inspiration and sense making**. Part of the young people is making this shift. Her

daughter, for instance, will move to New York in January for one year to commit herself to voluntary work with convicts.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Small groups of 3 to 4 participants wrote down the main themes on post-its notes. These included:

- *hope vs fear;*
- *war and violence;*
- *gap between rich and poor and between the North and South;*
- *spirituality vs materialism;*
- *worldwide economic inequality;*
- *concerns for the quality of life of our children;*
- *how to take action as an individual on a global scale;*
- *abundance of choice;*
- *limits to the idea of 'manipulability';*
- *people are more assertive and connected through social networks;*
- *is collective behavioural change possible;*
- *redistribution of welfare and wellbeing;*
- *demonstrate courage;*
- *dealing with diversity;*
- *caring for the earth.*

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.

The small groups prepared some hypotheses which were shared to discuss and develop further. It was a rich harvest! What follows is an attempt to capture the main hypotheses with some additional comments and issues in the discussion.

Because I cannot change anything about the world and how things evolve, I will become cynical, anxious, powerless and I regress, withdrawn in my own little world and I will go after the money ('the big fuck you'); since this doesn't solve anything, it will make me feel even more powerless (learned helplessness). Or: . . . then I take up my responsibility and a greater solidarity will emerge out of this individual response.

- Two responses are possible; which tendency will prevail?

Because we go after material comfort and certainty and are not prepared to make concessions, this leads to a status quo, keeps the economical inequality as it is and will eventually lead to the exhaustion of the earth.

Because male qualities (control, putting things in the world) are prominent and overvalued in our society, and female qualities (care, connection) are often not rewarded, our society is out of balance and thus things will go wrong.

- It also leads to a twofold isolation: men in their world and women in their world.
- Remark: has there ever been any balance between the two qualities?
- Female values such as multitasking, care are gaining in importance. Women are moving into a dominant position in relation to men; this leads to a switch in professional relationships. And, consequently, this could lead to changes in other domains.
- The required shift is 'servant leadership': what does the world need today? Start actions from there.
- In our group it is striking that the men started their introduction by saying they are 'fathers' and have 'x children'. They seem to consider the education of their children as an act of citizenship; is that the same for women?
- Educating children to become responsible citizens is a critical task for both men and women!!
- The educational system seems to be taking over the role of education from parents.
- The amount of female engineers and engineering students is decreasing, despite all the efforts. This creates a huge imbalance.

Because there is material abundance, citizens in this society have a lot to lose and this leads to anxiety, immobility, waiting and selfishness, but it may also result in people searching for an ultimate sense.

Because citizens are afraid of difference, they will attempt to minimize, ignore or assimilate the differences, and this leads to an impoverishment in society.

Because we are confronted with big and complex problems, citizens think they need experts and they will establish commissions, organisations and institutions which will solve our problems for us; by doing so, we do not take up our responsibility, cover up the problem and consequently do not feel involved anymore.

- Problems are so complex that we cannot no longer solve them alone.
- We shift responsibility to experts and institutions because we cannot deal with our uncertainty and anxiety.
- Experts can play a dirty role here: I know, and you don't!

- ‘Yes’, experts are indeed needed, because problems truly are more complex today. Delegating responsibility to experts has become a necessity. The result is, however, that we lose connection with the problems. For instance, in politics, despite all the efforts (public forum, websites) the public is not interested in politics. And thus those public sites become some form of ‘fake’ connection with citizens.
- ‘No’, problems are not more complex than they used to be! It is just the way they are presented.

Because demonstrating courage entails the risk of being excluded, citizens keep their heads down and this leads to immobility and passivity.

Because citizens are more assertive and more aware, they no longer accept purely hierarchical structures and this will lead to new ways of working and organizing.

- We need people who take up leadership, but *new* forms of leadership in new forms of collaboration.
- Or is it the other way around: complex organizations need more assertive people and when they come in, the form of the organization will change.
- Not only do we need new ways of working, we also need new forms of living (high number of singles!)

Because citizens feel powerless, they will take joint action focusing on a concrete goal, and thus will feel better and useful.

- The risk is that if all citizens take the action they think is useful and relevant, this will lead to polarization because there is no *joint* action. The question then is: who determines what the common goal should be?
- This requires a tolerance for differences in action and focus from different people/groups.

(We ended with a positive and hopeful note) *Because there is a massive concern for the issue of climate change, citizens will collectively take action and do efforts in order to reduce their carbon footprint and this will lead to the rescue of the earth!*

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