

**"Ireland and the World
at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post
held in 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. 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 convener opened by asking members 'what's on your mind?' Members began by describing different ways of experiencing this day and this time. These included noticing that they were withdrawing from activity, being quiet, feeling immobilised. It was noted that 'Blue Monday' – the most depressing day in the year – had just happened and that it was good to put a label on the feeling. In contrast, other members remarked on the beauty of the weather on Blue Monday. A member who is voluntarily not working remarked on the time and space to notice and enjoy everyday beauty.

Members were preoccupied with the sudden and dramatic transition out of the 'Celtic Tiger' experience in Irish society. Some were enraged at the unfairness now becoming more evident: some people going to prison for small debts while the county bails out the banks. Members commented on the unattractive parts of the boom years and noted that it was now possible to go into town, bump into people, have time to meet and talk. There was some talk about the new possibility of thinking about what it is that we want – what's important. A member felt that just as we had not shared the material benefits of the boom fairly, we were now not sharing the time benefits of the recession, so that more and more work is piled on to some people, who can't complain because they are lucky to have jobs, while others have too much time and not enough to do to occupy themselves.

One member had regrets about the passing of the Celtic Tiger. It was lovely to be in an Ireland without material want, with opportunity and security and with the buzz and energy that came from feeling anything was possible. This was accompanied by greed and disregard for others. The valuing of financial success was at the expense of caring. Members noted that it had not been acceptable to talk about personal self or life in the boom, but that this was now becoming possible. There was reflection on the noticeable upward trajectory of wealth over the last ten years. We are all left to reflect, as individuals and society, on where we were, what we got and what we're left with.

One member was noticing her own awareness of 'being in charge' – of having to take on the responsibility for decisions around people's lives and at the same time feeling powerless to really make changes.

There was a feeling that heaviness – feeling weighed down – was now a default position. We are having to work harder for the lightness. We are feeling an emerging sense of common purpose, realising that security is very fragile, alongside this sense of powerlessness and having no control.

Like the recent bad weather, there is more of a sense of community in adverse conditions. We can be refreshed and renewed by our current experience. There is going to have to be more sharing. This is a new opportunity if we can find the resilience to survive and endure.

There is an overall sense of optimism. We don't need any more buildings, we need more staff to staff them. We need to see that there is a level of momentum going on in the economy.

A member who is a mother of young adults expressed confidence that they will be fine – they will make it. What she is left with are questions about a search for something for herself: we are asking ourselves “can I not do something different?” “What's a reasonable response?” “I rage at what has happened, but I want to turn that into something.” How do we mobilise a different response? The potential is within us to be different.

Members expressed the pull towards direct communication – wanting people to find their voice. There's an impatience with 'the long grass'. It feels like the push towards partnership is now having to battle against fragmentation. There is a new readiness in all of us to respond to leadership – locally and nationally. There is value in creating community around the task. The new kind of reality helps a focus on and support for leaders. Just 'stoning' or blaming does not serve anything, does not take us anywhere. This is true of the response to the Murphy report [the latest report on the Catholic Church's response to clerical sexual abuse] and to the evidence in relation to banks and property developers. In all these cases, it is very hard to move on if you feel you haven't been heard. A typical Irish response is to hold the stone but behind the back. There has to be another way to respond. At the same time the power issues are there – institutional abuse of power. As individuals and citizens, we are looking to ourselves and looking for leadership to take on the big, fundamental things.

There was a discussion about the empowering impact of starting small, not to avoid conflict but to notice the impact of taking your own power. There is a tendency to want to withdraw, to stay safe. We get the leadership we deserve. Members observed themselves looking for a different response in themselves, willing to risk speaking out.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Theme 1: Finding a balance between withdrawal and activism

Being quiet – slowing down, room for reflection. Reflection has been colonised by politics – can we reclaim this? Reflection giving rise to real-isation, becoming and being real.

Theme 2: Finding out voice

Letting go of blame. Authorising ourselves to speak the truth. We have a responsibility to understand, to struggle with the issues and to discover or create other, different, better ways of being and doing.

Theme 3: Leadership

The trauma in society provides an opportunity – maybe a requirement – for transition and transformation. We recognise and wish for changing values in ourselves and in society. We want to offer and be offered leadership, both taking charge and be taken-in-charge.

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.

There was a preoccupation with the overall context of Irish society at this time: a sudden and severe economic downturn is a genuine concern and affects everyone. The members worked to go beyond the description of the experiences arising in trying to understand what is happening at a psychological level in society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Denial of Pain

Analysis: Members commented that Haiti was not talked about, nor was global warming. The discussion only mentioned the disclosures about the Catholic Church in a peripheral way. Homelessness, people losing their homes, job losses and the many frightening losses and risks we are now familiar with were not spoken about. Members interpreted this as a denial of pain and anxiety. We are focusing on the positive potential and possibilities to reassure ourselves that we will survive this time, that good things can come from it. A member reminded the membership of the early ads about Aids, designed to scare people and reminded the meeting that the end-of-the-world scenario never came to pass. In the context of the Listening Post, this was an apparent insistence that the worst will not happen.

Hypothesis: We are experiencing painful and frightening changes in our economy and in the wider world and these are having a direct impact on people. We are also unsure about how much worse things will get and frightened at the prospect of greater loss of security in many forms. It is difficult to tolerate this pain and fear. So we don't talk about the horror. We don't acknowledge it, we deny it and insist on the positive and optimistic elements of our situation. We feel overwhelmed and unsure, but these feelings are too difficult to live with, day-to-day, so we 'look on the bright side'. This helps us to endure and survive, it has the risk of encouraging us to withdraw and just wait until things get better but it also holds the possibility that the discomfort we feel will drive us to adopt other ways of thinking, understanding and relating to each other as citizens.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Emasculation

Analysis: The (male) 'Masters of the Universe', in banking, politics and the church have failed. We are entering an emasculated state and taking a female perspective – in the face of disaster and failure there is an insistence on optimism: homemaking, family, and community. We are having private conversations about things that matter to everyone – that should be public conversations. In looking for directions to the room in which the Listening Post was held, a staff member in the venue observed that the name of the event – a Listening Post – made him think about nosy (women) neighbours leaning over the fence. There were comments about the value of having nosy neighbours, that we lost our involvement in each other's lives in the good times and that it was important to return to having an interest in each other.

Hypothesis: Because the male model of organising society has failed, citizens experience fear and confusion and are both rejecting the failed model and unable to articulate or agree on a different way of thinking and living. A result is a retreat to a primary identification, represented by female values: homemaking, withdrawal, quietness. There is a focus on family and community where identity can be confirmed without threat. There is a retreat from the battlefield of the 'marketplace' of society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Guilt and denial of guilt

Analysis: In an attempt to understand the meaning of our responsibility and involvement in 'then' (the excesses of the boom years) and 'now' (real-isation, getting sense), it was realized that we all have the capacity for excess and that this is part of human nature. It was felt that it was a very difficult task to explore 'us' (the victims, the people who did not take part in excess, those who now have to pay for those times) and 'them' (the 'baddies' – the bankers, developers and politicians). It was acknowledged that many of those we characterize as 'baddies' were not corrupt but took risks and invested to create the society we were all involved in. In the same ways, other kinds of abuses were ignored and citizens were content to look the other way.

We consider our own involvement – we all benefitted – but it is uncomfortable to consider that we too are responsible for where we have ended up. We recognize that it is easier to locate all the 'bad' and responsibility in others and keep the 'good' feelings inside ourselves. As long as we can identify and name who the 'bad' people are, we can deny our own involvement, capacity and responsibility. It is difficult to acknowledge that I am the oppressor. It is easier to condemn 'the other'.

Hypothesis: We share responsibility for the abuses – of power, of children, of resources, of position – and we all benefited from the years of the celtic tiger. We experience guilt and shame because of this and we deny our guilt and involvement. We are loud in our condemnation of those who are to blame for the collapse of our economy. The result is exaggerated, simplistic notions about individuals and groups associated with the collapse of the economy and with other abuses and demonisation of these groups. The emotions associated with this blocks our ability to consider other ways of thinking about responsibility for the way things are now: we are unable to listen to different views or perspectives. It is necessary to hate the other in order to avoid hating ourselves, so

reflection and understanding become very difficult. There is a refusal to engage with 'the other within'.

Analysis and Hypothesis 4

The struggle for maturity

Analysis: We were infantilised, as citizens, and we colluded in that infantilisation. For decades, we allowed the church and politicians to tell us what we needed and what was good for us. We replaced these parents with the more modern and cosmopolitan parent of the banker, developer and marketplace over the last ten years. The patriarch has now been shown to be mad and demented. We are suddenly the adult child with no experience of being an adult. We have to quickly discover the discomfort and responsibility of maturity. We get overwhelmed with this and are sometimes immobilised, we don't know how to behave, what to do. Ireland has behaved like a teenager who had a very hard childhood: experiencing the overpowering impact of authority, becoming anarchical and anti-establishment but without developed personal power to speak or act. We are unfamiliar with our own voice and are not sure how to use it.

Hypothesis: Because the structures of authority have failed, we are thrown back on our own resources as citizens. We have little experience of taking mature, responsible authority as individuals or citizens. When we were well-off, we behaved like adolescents. Now we are learning that we are the adults, we are struggling to behave as mature adults. We seek leadership in others, but are disappointed and apprehensive, reluctant to recognise or invest authority in another structure or person. We move between a wish to withdraw and be isolated and a wish to take the risk of engaging with others, taking and giving mature power and authority. The only things we are certain about is what is not /has not worked: we are uncertain about all else.

Convener: Mary Rafferty