"Switzerland and the World at the Dawn of 2010"
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.

The main preoccupations were: a concern with whether the government offered leadership and a vision to take Switzerland into the future, a debate about the sense of 'fair play' in Switzerland and questions of immigration. One issue which combined these pre-occupations was the vote taken last November on whether Switzerland should allow more minarets to be built. There was a feeling that the issue had been mismanaged, highlighting criticism about the ways in which the Government handles issues of immigration and internationalisation. It was said that the Government were quick to demonstrate the downsides of internationalisation and slow to credit the benefits such as foreign capital and international companies relocating to Switzerland. A question was voiced about how the rest of the world viewed Switzerland's decision not to allow more minarets to be built, clearly touching the heart of what Switzerland represents internationally. Yet over 57% of the people voted against more minarets. There was speculation about the influence of the media or the far right and the posters which displayed the 'menace of muslim invasion' in their threatening images. It seems the minarets are a symbol of a life that is visibly, even blatantly 'different'. There was discussion that diversity is not celebrated here in Switzerland as it is in other neighbouring countries. Diversity is mainly swept under the carpet and differences are tolerated providing they are neither too numerous nor too visibly different. Yet, it was felt that part of the country's identity is connected to a sense of 'fair play' and of neutrality, this is especially seen at the individual level; yet there is a contradiction on the systemic level for which people were more critical — for example how international capital is attracted to Switzerland. Another feeling is that Switzerland is more gloomy than is warranted by its actual situation, which despite the recent economic crisis, remains solid.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three convergent themes:

1. **Pains of Golablisation**
   Switzerland has many benefits from globalisation; it is thought to be one of the three major financial centres in the world which brings considerable benefits to the country. Despite the recession it's economy is reasonably intact, and the standard of living is very high. However, these benefits are not particularly well communicated leaving the country in a rather gloomy depressed frame of mind. Instead threats are readily brandished highlighting the pains of internationalising represented by the influx of foreigners and different ways of life. The minarets seemed to have symbolised this visibly different approach to life and to have generated a backlash from the conservative right which strives to maintain the country in a more idealised form.

2. **The representation of Switzerland**
   There is much variety in the country, showing up as regional differences, both culturally and linguistically. There are also many common characteristics that appeal to members of the Listening Post. There was widespread agreement that we appreciate the respect for the individual, a sense of 'fair play' and a just society which supports its weaker members. There was debate about whether Switzerland really is and has been an ideal country. Often Switzerland is imagined to be an idyllic place, in part due to its neutrality, in part due to its incredible natural beauty and in part due to its high standards of education and its large share of the international capital and wealth market. Of course, if Switzerland is an ideal place — either in reality or in fantasy, it makes the threat of loss much more painful. Several members recalled that before the Second World War Switzerland was ostensibly a nation of farmers and cheese-makers who lived off the land. Indeed until this time more people emigrated from Switzerland than immigrated to Switzerland. A museum that shows Switzerland as it used to be over one hundred years ago preserves and displays the beauty of days gone by in buildings, farms and artefacts. And yet it was noted that whilst the past was beautiful in many ways (especially when seen objectively in a museum), but that it also reeked of poverty and hardship.

3. **What is Swiss, what is foreign?**
   Much discussion centred on what is Swiss, what is foreign? What is an intriguingly acceptable difference and what represents a more menacing form of difference? Almost everyone at the Listening Post had moved to the area from other parts of Switzerland or from abroad, adding to the conundrum of what is really Swiss. It was noted that in days gone by you could tell where someone was from in terms of community and family from their name and yet nowadays, a name is not an accurate form of identifying someone's background, perhaps similar to many other countries of the world. Some thoughtful members of the Listening Post recognised that the influx of foreigners to the country made up in some part for the huge numbers of people who leave the country, identifying that 22% of the population is comprised of immigrants. Additionally it is estimated that around 20% of the population is comprised of foreigners. Thus Swiss identity is a conundrum, compounded by huge numbers of Swiss abroad (who do not have a representative here in the country), foreign immigration, regional and linguistic differences and an increasingly common use of English, which serves to bridge many differences.

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.

Two hypotheses are offered related to the themes of identity in an era of increasing internationalisation.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: Switzerland has always comprised a diverse population; with multiple languages spoken and variety in lifestyle across the 26 cantons. However, much of the discussion focused around what is an acceptable level of difference and it was felt that despite the regional differences, many of the differences that exist in the country are both well-known and rather minimal in comparison with some of the differences that are now seen to threaten the Swiss way of life. The minaret issue took up significant time in the Listening Post just as it did last autumn in the country as it was controversial. Four minarets currently exist in the country, mainly in four of the cities or big towns, yet the vote sent a message that for a majority of the population this is enough. It is as if only so much difference can be tolerated. Some discussion questioned whether the more visible the differences, the more likely they are to generate a potential backlash. Another possibility is that differences are tolerated when they do not require any special attention or provision. Finally it may be particularly threatening when the differences are seen to be too big or to represent too many people such as a large number of people coming from one other country or culture.

Hypothesis: Because Switzerland has recognised that cultural and religious integration has not been particularly successful in other European countries and because few plans are evident to make the integration work, either in the Swiss Government or in other Governments, Swiss society rejects visible and large scale signs of difference such as the Minarets in order to preserve a known way of life. Indeed it was said that far from embracing and celebrating difference, Switzerland tends to brush differences under the carpet and to neutralise them. It may well be fear of the unknown and fear of change itself that is being rejected on a systemic level, as on an individual level the Swiss are reasonably welcoming to foreigners in part evidenced by the large numbers of multicultural marriages that exist here. It seems that what might lie beneath the surface is a desire for containment and control in the threat of unknown, large-scale, unpredictable forces.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Swiss society is relatively stable, with a fairly flat structure and a solid and broad economic base. It was felt that there doesn't seem to be the same difficult fringe members of society that exist in other countries and it was wondered whether difficulties are then projected onto foreigners who may be seen to carry the more negative elements. This may be compounded by the relatively negative communication about globalisation, which tends to highlight the potential losses rather than to celebrate the benefits that Switzerland has gained from the global economy. Unless and

until the very tangible benefits of globalisation are recognised, there may be a tendency to reject foreigners as potential sources of problems, perhaps at both ends of the social scale. It is well-known that the very wealthy can avoid paying high taxes here and those escaping difficulties in poor countries are often scape-goated and ostracised as the problematic elements of society, such as the Albanians or ex Yugoslavians.

Hypothesis: Because the difficulties of internationalisation are so evident in other neighbouring countries such as France, Italy and Germany, Switzerland is protecting itself against the darker sides of internationalisation. This manifests itself as a defensive attitude towards globalisation, highlighting the problems associated with it and down-playing the benefits. Part of this defensive attitude may be revealed in the overly gloomy outlook that Switzerland has. This gloomy and internally focused pre-occupation serves as a defence to prevent Switzerland from living up to its international potential and assuming a more prominent (but also more risky) role in the international arena.

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