

**"Canada and the World
at the Dawn of 2011"
Report of a Listening Post
held in Toronto on 5th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post we were invited to identify, contribute, and explore our experience in our various social roles. This part of the evening was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to our social context. The discussion was lively and, the main focus was on economic disparities, the difficulties imposed by calcifying bureaucracies, special interests and tribalism. There were very mixed views. Some people were deeply pessimistic. They remarked on the apparent impossibility of genuinely meaningful positive change in how things are run, the inevitable collapse of the environment due to overuse by a growing population; the negative effects of the internet on young people who seemed to be more self-centred and less concerned about the feelings of others than ever, and the dramatic difference between the personal and the political. Others were mildly optimistic about the potential for creative change and progress, there seemed to be some openings for improvements and some more possibilities for citizen engagement in entrenched systems; they noted especially the dedication of young people to make positive change at local and manageable levels.

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.

Overcoming Income Inequalities

The discussion began with a declaration of the disparity between the everyday interactions with people in the world, which are polite, friendly and even express concern for others, and the indifference to others that occurs at the broad social level that tolerates the increasing extremes of inequality of income that have grown even worse over the last years. This topic seemed linked to the sense that even though everyone agreed that economic inequalities were increasing no one seemed able to do anything to reverse this trend. Some claimed that this was at least partly a tribal issue that people at different social and income levels form tribes to protect their current state. Canada which is a moderate country made up of moderate people who suffer from cold winters has a Conservative government that is bent on tax reductions which as everyone knows tends to increase income disparity. On the other hand there appear to be growing efforts to engage citizens in government and these suggest a more optimistic tendency. It was pointed out that in the history of the world despite growing disparity virtually every group throughout the world is better off.

The State of the World: End is Near

A new theme emerged somewhat surreptitiously and was repeated several times. It was

felt by some members of the group that deterioration of the environment is due not only to increasing population but also to the increasing average wealth of humans. This results in increased use of non-renewable environmental resources at a catastrophic rate. Some members of the group feared that as a result the world would not be inhabitable by humans within several lifetimes. This conclusion was not unanimous for others asserted that there were new forces that were working to save the world from excessive ecological damage, that these forces were gaining ground through ingenuity and very innovative local practices. Interestingly there was little scepticism expressed about the possibility that the end of the world might be near should nothing be done.

The Effects of the Internet on Young People

The Internet and the rapid introduction of new technologies for virtual gaming and social networking have changed the nature of direct friendship and in person social interaction. Some felt that the computer generation is much more self-involved and narcissistic. They seek personal advantage, are obsessed with themselves and are not concerned about others feelings or needs. The story about a young man guzzling the last glass of orange juice despite the declared needs of a sick person was presented as an example of this phenomenon. Others felt that the Internet and the mostly young people who used it extensively for social networking were the source of new local and international communities which held the key to the future. Everyone can join a series of unique electronic communities devoted to their particular interests. They can engage or disengage at will. They can become powerful political forces very quickly.

Collaboration with Those We Hate

And powerful political forces can dissipate as quickly as they arise. There was some discussion of the rise and fall of Obama's popularity in the United States. The discussion of this phenomenon focused on the intractability of Obama's right wing opponents. In Toronto the election of a right wing populist mayor led participants to wonder if opposition to him would be similarly intractable by an equally rigid left-wing. Was it possible to create a constructive workable environment with those with whom we have very strong political disagreements? The group was split. Some thought it possible and even necessary. Others believed that the damage that the right had caused to progressive policies in the past meant that an unalloyed opposition was necessary now and in the future.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3 of the Listening Post we were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics that may be predominant. It is assumed in this part of our discussion that our individual and collective ideas and ways of thinking determine how we perceive the world. We tried to develop hypotheses as to why these concerns might be occurring now and although there were few clear, easily identifiable hypotheses, there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This discussion has been distilled into the following two hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: There were not many explanations about the concerns expressed in the room. The talk was as usual lively and somewhat disorderly. The discussion about the imminent demise of the human race due to the using up of non-renewable environmental resources was especially suggestive.

Hypothesis: The doomsday scenario that was mitigated by a modest hope for the young suggested that the group itself was aging and using up its own resources at an unsustainable rate. There was a suggestion that this might be the last occasion for a Listening Post meeting with these members of the group. Fear of imminent death of the group mirrored the unavoidable spectre of the aging and unavoidable death of its members. There was however the slight hope that the young would carry on.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The issue of increased abrasiveness and a reduced capacity for finding intermediate solutions to problems has created a win-lose environment. The split in society was reflected in the split in the group about the possibility of change and the possibility of coming to some kind of resolution of differences between right-leaning and left leaning individuals and groups.

Hypothesis: It may be that the split in society reflects a growing split in groups such as the one that met for the Listening Post and the individuals in it about left-leaning and right-leaning aspects of us. Do we tend to split off those parts of ourselves that assure that we are well-cared for at the expense of others for those parts of ourselves that are concerned about the wellbeing of other people? Is there some way of recognizing and taking both into account?

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