"Ireland and the World at the Dawn of 2011"
Report of a Listening Post held in Dublin on 5th 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?' The first member to speak hoped that it would be a better year than 2010. Young members commented that it was the first New Year's party that had a tone of 'good riddance' to the year just past and a hope rather than an expectation that the year ahead would be better. Other comments included an awareness of a requirement for patient endurance and stoicism, to get through this difficult time in Ireland. The general air of impending doom, or of a disaster that has already happened to us in Ireland was challenged by some members asking 'what has actually changed?'. Other members noted that it was hard to find equilibrium — we were concerned with the excesses of the 'Celtic Tiger' years, but we have now swung too far in the opposite direction. One member commented that 2010 had been very difficult for her, that she had been physically ill and that she was very aware of the widespread anger towards bankers and politicians. She found herself asking "how did I contribute [to this catastrophe]? What did I do to stop it?" In the context of an imminent general election, there was a resolution to be more demanding of politicians and an association made between this and the bad things that have happened 'by default', because no one questioned the direction we were going and the actions that were taken.

A member shared a general feeling of dislocation, of being unable to focus or settle on a particular role or perspective, family, professional, citizen. There was a discussion about feeling like 'the older generation' and wanting to galvanise the self into action in response to this. Younger members talked about the strangeness of seeing your parents not being sure for the first time in your life. The younger members shared a feeling of obligation to feel angry and questioned how much of the anger is fabricated, for public consumption and not deeply felt. There was an irritation at the resistance to exploring the causes of the current situation, the politician's line of 'there's no point in looking backwards: we are where we are'. We vacillate between wanting to understand what went wrong and wanting to stop recriminations. Having just got used to enjoying being proud of being Irish, we are having to get used to being ashamed to be Irish. We don't focus on or we forget that at least some of the crisis is worldwide. It's hard to tolerate the excuse that 'our leaders had the best advice', 'no-one saw it coming'. This raises questions about the nature of government — if the analysis of what went wrong is so superficial how do we know the solutions are right?

For young people, it's difficult to come up with an alternative and you don't want to admit that you don't have an answer. It feels like there is a spotlight on young graduates. An example of the dilemma is the focus on medical graduates emigrating — their education costs the state 500,000 euro and they are criticised for not making a return to society on that, but there are no jobs for them. In response to this, a member drew attention to the resistance to the introduction of student loans in the UK.

Members had different views about whether we are conformist or not. One member talked passionately about a recent experience of come together with a large number of diverse people from all parts of the country for a convened meeting called 'Claiming Our Future' in which a very democratic and engaged process led to setting priorities for the country for 15 to 20 years. Another member reported that she too had been part of this work, had felt engaged and positive, but not long afterwards found herself criticising the process and returning to cynicism and powerlessness.

A member reported her pleasure in spending time with small children. Another member told about the energy and commitment of newly qualified teachers and how exciting it is to work with them. Other members associated to this positive theme by reporting experiences in the recent bad weather: "who were these people pushing my car in the snow?". There is a choice between 'every man for himself' or we help each other. The sense of community in the bad weather was very life affirming and enhancing.

A member posed a question about whether these experiences are just ours or if this is wider. She observed that there are decades when core institutions are working well and we get on with our lives. Then something happens and the vulnerability of structures become evident. When they let us down, we have to collectively rethink the institutions so that we reach a new equilibrium and we can trust the institutions. We now all want to be 'insiders' but unless we make progress with reshaping the institutions we are going to be damaged. We have to make a step change. And when changes start happening, people become uncomfortable. A member pointed to the experience of Barack Obama — 'change, hope, we are going to be a different country' but all regular day to day things and things involving big changes are complicated and resistance is increased when people discover that the change they wish for is going to require them to change. The sense of possibility that things could really change is scary.

Members talked about being affected or not affected by the current turmoil. A member commented "I want to be in the struggle — that's where life is, in the struggle". There is a sense of the crisis creating some common ground. There was a parallel with the bad weather "the first time I ever spoke to some of my neighbours was in the snow". Within the crisis there is energy and possibility. The awfulness of the situation we are in could — just — be a transformative space. A member illustrated the possibilities created by all the empty retail space, how used for studio space where a mix of people came on board and now 'it can't be controlled' — this is a very creative moment to be in. Members attended to the mixture of fear at the loss of control and excitement at the possibilities opened up.

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: Being Overwhelmed
How much more can we take? The withdrawal is a response to being fed endless hours of

inconclusive 'analysis' from newly found experts. Much analysis involves reprimanding us for our reckless and foolish behaviour. The size of the figure, the billions, the size of the debt, the complexity of 'the markets', the number of generations who will be paying for this — it is all too much to take in and to take.

Theme 2: Age and Generation confused
New ways of understanding age and generational positions. Influencing who is 'in' and who's 'out', who is 'us' and who is 'them'. Not clear now where power and authority lies — with the discredited older generation who got us into this? With the younger generation, who are told they are too spoiled and lacking the capacity to survive in this new world? Both generations being given both the blame and the responsibility for finding a solution.

Theme 3: Potential wasted AND potential created in the craziness of the current situation
There is a sadness and loss, a feeling of waste, of young graduates being exported to benefit other countries while we need those skills and talents here. At the same time there is a curious excitement in the possibility that having crashed the old system, we might just be able to create something better and new.

Theme 4: The wish for trustworthy institutions
The betrayal when institutions let you down. We are critical and one revelation after another reveals how weak and inadequate the institutional structures were. There is a recognition that we need institutions that work, that we can trust, so that we can get on with our lives. Condemnation of all institutions is not an adequate response and unless we learn how institutions fail we will continue to construct them in the same ways, with the same failings and weaknesses.

Theme 5: Related axes of personal agency and powerlessness and joining and withdrawal
This was offered as a visual representation of two axes intersecting to form quadrants. Members described the bleak but dominant reality of being withdrawn and powerless — the feeling that we can't take much more. Where people locate themselves within this frame swings wildly from one day to the next — it's unclear where best to locate the self. The various possible positions include dislocation or complete seismic change and recognising that within powerlessness lies the possibility of transformation. The power of working with each other is revealed when we take a chance, relate, engage.

Theme 6: Irishness and a challenge to identity
The simultaneous pride and shame in being Irish. We quickly revert to familiar shame of being unequal, inadequate. Being the butt of international jokes feels like an old, familiar position for us.

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: the increasingly 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

Pain and fear

Analysis: The economic crisis and the failure of government and institutions have led to profound fears for our security and well-being. We are being fed an analysis that holds us responsible. We reject the blame and readily blame politicians, bankers, bond-holders and those who borrowed and bought over-priced housing. At the same time, we have some sense of being deserving of blame. The younger members held an optimistic view of the future and others also found that position. Feelings of rage are held in check by feelings of disconnection, impotence and confusion.

Hypothesis: The loss of wealth and the prospect of further loss, for individuals and the state, have led to anger, uncertainty and fear. We are unsure and ashamed of our own responsibility for the crisis. Our self-image as confident poster-child for success in Europe is dismantled. There is a sense of uncertainty in society. We cast around for individuals, groups and institutions on which to locate these unwanted feelings. This process enables us to feel more positive, to separate from these feelings but we are concerned that the broken institutions cannot contain our fears for the future.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Taking responsibility in an uncertain world

Analysis: We recognise that we have misplaced our trust in institutions and individuals and that we colluded with the fantasy that the good times would last. Various kinds of crisis remind us that we have lost our ability to trust and connect with each other in local communities and as citizens. Crisis and need is forcing us to rediscover our interdependence and to recognise the risks required to connect and engage but also the creative possibilities that are created in relationship to each other. This is a struggle, which is both welcomed and unwanted. We cannot yet overcome the illusions that we are independent and in control and at the same time we struggle to take more responsibility for ourselves.

Hypothesis: We have been protected from disaster, natural and man-made, so we have been able to deny our vulnerability, loss of control and interconnectedness. The current crisis makes us face stark choices between failing alone and powerless and surviving in inter-dependence and reliance on others, with some possibility of personal agency. Denial has been replaced with pessimism and in turn, pessimism is tempered by glimpses of a more hopeful future.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Identity and influence

Analysis: Members are preoccupied with national and international events impacting on Ireland and on us as citizens. It is difficult to know where to focus energy and belief and we move between perspectives that are personal, related to work role, local

community, citizen of Ireland, citizen of Europe. We feel impotent to influence the larger picture, so we are engaged where we can see and feel our connection and impact, seeking out spaces where our voice can be heard. We notice the possibilities for influence and agency when we take the risk of connecting with others. We struggle to recognize ourselves in the representation in the media and taken-for-granted parts of our identity and self-image have been damaged. Identity and attributes associated with particular generations and ages have been dismantled and we are not sure how to reconstruct these.

Hypothesis: We are overwhelmed by the scale of the financial disaster and cannot find a way to relate to this as individuals. We attempt to discover ways to contribute that are closer to home, personal and real. We struggle to imagine ways to engage as citizens, to take responsibility and to work in ways that make a difference. The unspoken discourse is the balance between our responsibility to and for our individual selves and our collective and shared responsibility as members of a local and national community. We are working to rediscover or redefine who we are and to seek control and influence over and in our lives.

Convener: Mary Rafferty