

"The Farøe Islands and the World at the Dawn of 2012"

Report of a Listening Post
held on 11th 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 lives,' that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

1. Apathetic Population

The population is in a state of perplexity and paralysis.

The people feels like they are being screwed over by irresponsible politicians, who are making drastic decisions concerning fees, taxation of pension funds, cutting taxes for the rich, increasing the cost of health insurance and generally not practising what they preached before they were elected.

Panic is spreading under the surface, mixed with a feeling of shame for electing the politicians in the first place: "*Who voted for these people??*" In private the people expresses their doubts about the politicians and their fear and anxiety for the future.

But there is almost no counter reaction. The public space is defined by silence, the absence of debate, emptiness and apathy. The Icelandic people stood outside their parliament in freezing cold for weeks protesting their incompetent leadership, we stand in front of our parliament for a couple of hours banging pot lids.

"Why should we use time and energy on longsighted solutions regarding the national theatre, the fisheries etc., when said solutions and agreements is cancelled by the stroke of a pen?"

2. Political Impotence

There has just been an election that resulted in a change of government and a significant tilt to the right. It looks like the new government won't live up to the promises made before the election and large parts of the electorate feels that the proposed solutions are short-sighted and cosmetic. Solidarity and independence from

Denmark are no longer on the political menu. Financial interests and the distribution of natural resources dominates a political debate which is overshadowed by conflicts of interest, inability and corruption.

The newly elected politicians favour conservative financiers, and ignore the unions and other traditional collaborators. That creates confusion, insecurity and fear. Some call it a meltdown of the political process: It is no longer possible to create long-sighted solutions, and existing decisions and compromises are being ignored by the government and their financial backers.

“Here you make a decision, then there’s a discussion, and the decision is changed. Other places you make a long-sighted strategy and sticks with it. . .”

3. Collective Winter depression

People are generally moodier than last year. The focus is on your limitations, not your opportunities. *“Even the weather sucks!”*

4. Chasm between reality and perceived reality!

Reality is becoming more defined: There’s not enough work, there is a huge deficit, the prices are high and we have got nepotism, depopulation, mental health problems and conflicts of interest: The minister of fisheries didn’t deceive anyone, he declared he had conflicts of interest but got elected anyway.

We have got access to all information, and the world enters your living room through the television and computers even though we are a little speck in the North Atlantic Ocean. That challenges the perceived reality.

Many are suppressed in their families, but the fear of reprisals makes it easier to adopt a perceived reality than face real reality.

Since we live in a small society, this can be transplanted to society as a whole. This process has always been around, but we used to be better at denial and repressing it. . .

“Can we both cut taxes and raise wages during a financial crisis. . . ?”

5. Fear of taking responsibility

We are not capable of saying ‘We want this! We don’t want that!’ We avoid prioritizing. When times are good we want ‘Loysing’ (independence from Denmark), and when times are bad we want the security of ‘Samband’ (being part of Denmark). It affects us mentally that we are not independent. Fear of standing on one’s own two feet, will, as long as the situation isn’t solved, feed dependency, irresponsibility and spite.

In this country we don’t take responsibility for the country! The independence movement is on the back burner, and we don’t have a joint focus or rallying point.

The younger generation might change things, might accept more responsibility: *“I’ve got younger people living in my house, and they have gotten weekend jobs. . . I guess that’s a good sign. . . they believe it pays to work more”.*

6. No Man’s Land between the Family and Denmark

There are two great buffers for everything difficult or taboo: Denmark and Family. The misfits, the mentally ill and the criminals are referred to their family or ‘exported’ to

Denmark. The politicians avoid taking responsibility for the problems, and hope they disappear down one of the two big holes: the Family or Denmark.

The politicians are under pressure from interest groups, patient unions etc., which relieves acute problems, but hinders long-sighted planning. The only long-time plan that can achieve unanimous support is protecting the oldest ruin on the Faroes: the Kirkebø-Cathedral.

This leaves the society in a kind of no-man's-land where well-funded lobbyists, interest groups and religious societies can get maximal influence.

“On the Faroe Islands it is easy to get it your way, as long as you are lucky enough to have the right connections. Everywhere else it takes forever because of bureaucracy and principles about treating people equally”.

7. Slippery slope from solidarity towards individuality

Solidarity has come under pressure. The ideal is the roots in the immediate and extended family, but now there is a tendency that everyone looks out for themselves first. The pension is your own responsibility, the sick and weak are exported to other countries, the rich should be rewarded, and the people is divided over cutting taxes and reducing benefits.

There is a big difference between rural and urban areas. Solidarity by necessity has always been a part of survival in minor societies, but libertarianism and self-interest are gaining ground in urban environments. Is solidarity just an illusion? Haven't individualism always been prominent under the surface?

“Maybe the same goes for families. . .we don't need each other to the same degree anymore, and therefore we are more focused on our own needs?”

8. Tolerance and Diversity

10 years ago there was almost no visible homosexuals or mental problems in this country. Now we have undergone a positive transformation, where young religious people can party in weekends, homosexuals are part of the public space and satire, like 'Mold Varp', are shown in prime time television. The barriers are getting fewer and tolerance is growing. The religious bastions are still there, but lines are blurring. Job rotation is up and immigrants experience acceptance and intimacy in their new environments.

9. Silence is lurking

Focus has turned to the deafening silence in the public debate. Competent and highly educated people avoid uttering their opinions in public, and allows others (the politicians) to define our reality unopposed. Irresponsibility rules. It is not the fundamentalists or the blowhard politicians that are the problem – it is those that, in the role of observers, offer them no opposition.

Many is also afraid of stepping forward, since the public debate is often defined by a 'kill the messenger' mentality. This mentality provoke fear of reprisals or unnecessary discomforts for critical voices leading to a downward spiral of 'silent consent' and apathy. The missing debate is a great weakness in our society. Historically we have always said less than necessary, but with the current debate we will never get anywhere: *“No more shutting up, it is too damaging!”*

10. We are bad 'salesmen'

We are traditionally mostly concerned with fishing and producing, and we often comment on other nations ability to promote and sell their brand. It's like we lack self-worth and has trouble dealing with success – a self-worth repressed through generations with opinions like: 'Don't believe that you are anything special!' There is a switch inside the Faroese that stops us from becoming 'champions' – maybe because envy and jealousy are thriving on the islands. The success stories are being ignored, neglected or belittled.

We are world champions in catching fish, but lousy at selling it. And we have to sell the fish to survive. The cultural restriction that are natural and necessary in a little traditional production society has now become major obstacles when trying to interact and compete with our surroundings.

“Iceland is able to both sell fish and Iceland as a tourist attraction. Why cant we do the same?”

11. Pricing

How does the market work on the Faroe Islands? Does it work? Some goods cost 30-40% more on the Faroe Islands than in other Nordic countries.

Many suspect prices are really set by a shadowy conglomerate of monopolies, duopolies and hidden cartels, negating competition and benefitting the wealthy. But nobody says anything. . .!!

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.

Hypothesis 1

Collective Winter depression in Political Darkness

The newly elected government are making unpopular decisions and are cutting benefits, reducing the welfare society with obvious conflicts of interests among the decision makers. The population is perplexed and ashamed that they elected the politicians in the first place, but see no reasonable ways to react to the situation; this results in apathy, political paralysis and a collective winter depression at the beginning of 2012.

Hypothesis 2

Facing reality begets more tolerance and diversity

Reality is pushing harder and harder: There is unemployment, homosexuality, violence, discrimination, mental health problems, poverty, special needs and incompetent leadership in our society. The people experience that denial and social repression no

longer carry the same weight; resulting in more diversity, tolerance and room for the new generation, and maybe a new way to live.

Hypothesis 3

Irresponsibility invites 'Survival of the fittest'

We don't take full responsibility for the country in this country, and places our hopes in the belief that Denmark or the Family will 'absorb' all that is inconvenient, undesirable and 'ugly', and the population experiences hesitation, apathy, irresponsibility and a leadership incapable of finding long term solutions to the problems facing the society. The resulting political vacuum, where financial interests, special interests groups, clandestine networks and religious societies are free to dominate the order of business, puts a political 'survival of the fittest' – movement into the driver's seat of the Faroese society.

Hypothesis 4

Deafening silence stifles development

In a small society like the Faroe Islands there are many hidden connections, interests and bonds hidden just below the surface, that through generations have both controlled and repressed the individual in both the family and the society as a whole. Fear of reprisals have created an aversion to publicly stating critical opinions and observations; the resulting underdeveloped public debate and deafening silence leaves the political scene to blowhard politicians and preachers.

Hypothesis 5

Who wins: Socialism or Capitalism?

In the beginning of 2012 solidarity and socialism is under mounting pressure from capitalism and self-interests – both in the family and in the larger society. Policies involving taxes and pensions are undergone dramatic changes in a shift that benefits the wealthy, unions are no longer taken seriously and the cohesive power of the family is diminishing. There is a fundamental sense of insecurity and distrust in the longevity of the welfare society which is reflected in the fragmentation of people and rifts between interest groups.

Conveners: Jan Willemoes and Marin Vang