

**"Norway and the World
at the Dawn of 2012"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 12th January in Bergen**



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.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

***1. Lack of Engagement and Participation
in spite of crisis in European society***

The immediate context of the listening post was a leadership development programme for higher level managers, held at a venue outside Bergen. Participants were recruited from that programme and met up in a room at this venue after an intensive day of work. Fewer than expected had turned up for the session and one participant felt unable to contribute and left "because of information overload" shortly after having heard the introduction.

This context and start to the session is obviously related to the first emergent theme. There was concern and puzzlement related to the lack of participation in the event, in spite of its potential relevance and importance. Then the theme evolved in relation to the observation that there seems to be little concern and talk about the crisis in Europe. Politicians were believed to be exceptions to some extent, but even these seemed to exhibit limited concern. This was linked to contemporary Norwegian affluence and it was observed that issues in Norway now seemed to be a possible 'bubble' in the price property/homes and concern that it might 'burst', sex, exercise, 'low-carbo' diets and a shortage of butter(!) instead of the Euro-crisis. It was felt; however, that money also seems to be an ever present issue. But even the Nobel Peace Prize (this year given to three African women) seemed to have commanded little attention. Towards the end of the session the theme re-emerged when one participant asked: "Are people not concerned that people are being mowed down in Syria?" "One becomes immune", another said. Yet another observed that most people seemed to be more interested in lack of meat coming from abattoirs (slaughters), and the current shortage of butter caused by people on low-carbo diets.

2. A tremendous individualization

People's concern with what is 'close' to them (as exemplified above) was talked about in terms of another emergent theme: the increasing individualization – where everybody pays attention to his/her own interests and little else. It was felt that there is a corresponding lack of inquisitiveness and curiosity regarding the wider society. The participants bemoaned this state of affairs and agreed that people should be more interested in 'things greater than themselves'.

3. Revolution and social unrest in the wider society

As the focus shifted towards things greater than individuals: the state of the wider society; crisis, revolution and social unrest was mentioned: Occupy Wall Street, the revolution and unrest in the Arabic countries as well as the apparent instability in banking. It was stated that social unrest had not yet reached sufficient momentum to spread. It was felt that demands for change seem to emerge more frequently where the crisis is felt directly. One participant observed that banks used to be robbed by outsiders, whereas now it seemed that insiders/owners do the robbing. This may have served as a transition to the next major theme.

4. The Threat From Inside: Are we safe, and can the politicians/authorities be trusted to provide protection?

It was observed by one participant that the politicians' main concern seems to be survival and good pensions. Scandalous leaks from politics were mentioned (Wikileaks), and also the revolution in the media; as well as the importance of social media in recent revolutions – 'revolution mediated by Facebook'. "We don't know what's true anymore". "Individuals have trouble penetrating the wealth of information". "In Nazi Germany control was perhaps possible but now?" "Is media being misused to manipulate the public? For instance: The Syria situation might have been staged". "Do the politicians think things through?" "The decision to bomb Libya seemed to have been taken very quickly and with very little concern for the consequences". "Everything happens too fast", one participant said. Also there was concern that cruel and hateful statements on the web are published and spread without confrontation. "Who takes responsibility?" one participant asked. "Do they not see the threat, or don't they have the energy to deal with it?" asked another.

5. The vulnerable individual

This theme was touched upon in the above and seemed to continue as an underlying concern through the rest of the session. It was exemplified most clearly by a participant mentioning the instance (widely published in Norwegian media) when a female Norwegian soldier was ordered by her commanding officer to strip and bathe in the nude in front of male colleagues. Bullying and harassment on the web was also mentioned as examples of this.

6. The potential and possibilities in networks on the web

It was pointed out on several instances during the session (albeit by a minority of participants) that the web represents enormous potentials and possibilities for learning and development and that the closing down of the net because of possible misuse would mean that these opportunities were lost. These comments seemed always to come after someone pointed out the downsides and were also always followed by remarks about possible misuse of power over the net.

7. Information overload and the future

“We are taking in the whole world via TV and the web”. “It is overwhelming”. “It is all too much, everything happens too fast”. “What will happen to our children; they seem to be more 'hooked' than we are. But they're not interested in crises either”. “So, are we building engaged and interested citizens for the future?” “Access to information will not assure that we do so, structuring and tailoring is necessary”.

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. However, the members in the Norwegian listening post 2012 lacked knowledge of relevant theory so this part was not prioritized. It was appreciated by the participants that the preoccupations around lack of engagement reflected (at least in part) their frustration with the lack of interest from in the event from participants in the leadership development programme. However, the members did seek to go beyond this in an attempt to understand what was occurring at a psychological level in society. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

*The lack of participation in social issues:
Flight from complexity into individualism*

Analysis: There was some discussion around the issue of why people seemed to lack interest and this was initially felt to be related to two factors: geographical distance and the relative freedom from crisis/problems in Norway. In terms of the current crises it was stated that “Because the crises are so distant, they do not impinge as strongly on us as they do on those who are closer to them – so in this sense we are not engaged by them”. The Norwegian terror event of July 22nd last year was mentioned, and although the immediate surge of solidarity and shared focus/communality was acknowledged, participants seemed to feel that no convincing lasting effects of it were discernible at this point in time. There was also, however, an acknowledgement of the great complexity of the wider contemporary society and the degree to which this was felt to be overwhelming and threatening.

Hypothesis: Faced with an awareness of a somewhat distanced but highly complex and volatile wider society, as well as their own vulnerability, members of an affluent and relatively remote Norwegian society withdraw from this complexity. This results in a drift towards an individualized society, where ‘petty’ concerns about issues close at hand predominate public life.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

The threat from within: The vulnerable individual and the fear of failure of politicians/society when it comes to providing protection

Analysis: The analysis around this hypothesis was varied and fragmentary. There was scant mention of potential feelings of guilt resulting from Norwegian affluence in a time of shortages and crisis elsewhere. There was, however, one statement to the fact that it is ‘distasteful’ that we are so rich in Norway. More attention seemed to be given to the

vulnerability implicit in the wealth, the ordered and peaceful society with its increasing dependence on technology. There seemed to be a realization that the wealth and the vulnerability represents as paradox and that Norwegian society cannot exist in a vacuum: “everything has become so impenetrable, so complex”. On the connection to technology: “The digital technology is so fragile, it could so easily break down – and we are so dependent upon it”. There was also a sequence where participants focused on what seemed to be a general feeling of Norwegians that they should be taken care of, and protected by the State, whatever happened. Examples were the family who considered suing the Norwegian Post because their unlocked outdoor postbox had been broken into; Norwegians who got into trouble abroad and expected to be 'saved' by Norwegian authorities, regardless of whether they were to blame themselves or not. Other examples were doctors' mistakes and operations gone wrong and ensuing claims to be compensated for damages etc. The participants asked themselves and each other how this seemingly enormous dependency had arisen but no answer was immediately apparent. One participant said: “After all, it is not as if we are born this dependent”. Which, of course, is maybe precisely the case...?

Hypothesis: The realization of individual vulnerability and the strong anxiety resulting from this realization give rise to a pattern of dependency. Faced with an impenetrable wider society there does not seem to be any other alternative than to trust – at least implicitly – the politicians/authorities. And yet, this dependency must always be accompanied by the anxiety that politicians are not to be trusted – or indeed that control and order might be impossible to sustain in the long run. This gives rise to suspicions and accusations, perhaps even general mistrust against politicians and the state.

It is interesting that this hypothesis, if adequate, may imply an even stronger tendency towards individualism and perhaps also a split in society between individualism and 'State-ism'. And political polarization does seem to be happening in Norwegian society (and possibly in Europe) at this point in time. It might also be suggested that the emergent pattern of individualism may function as a social defence against the burdens and stresses and anxieties of living in a highly complex and seemingly highly volatile contemporary society.

Thus, we risk in Norway 'a hunt for the guilty (individual) party' after the terror attack in July 2011; faced with the choice between accepting and taking in that this might happen at any time, or finding some individual (or agency) to blame. As one of the participants said: “It is very unpleasant when I think of the time-consuming problems the police had with the make-shift boat they used, when they attempted crossing over to the island, where the killing was going on”.

Convener: