"Britain and the World at the Dawn 2012"

Report of a New Year's Listening Post held in London 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 experiences 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 Two, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part One.

1. Loss and Fragility

One participant recounted that the labour market is not currently a great proposition; and spoke of finding it difficult to get a job — being 50 and female was seen as a disadvantage. Those jobs that were available offered only short term contracts of 6 months. Contractual labour was seen as a mixed blessing, a chance perhaps to hold your head up high and just fulfil the contract or alternatively; feeling the pressure of what amounts to a probation period. A later reflection provided a different perspective: 6 months in the current occupational climate could be a year's salary if other contracts did not materialise.

Other members spoke of lost connections of being part of something and then leaving. Charity work and academic courses provided a sense of community but were difficult to sustain: charities, it was felt, do not pay much, and courses are expensive. Courses, like contracted Labour or short term work, are time limited and come to an end.

In society there are generations that do not have a model of work, what do they do? Liver disease was one answer provided by the group. There was some consideration that a part of social life is always going to be anti-community. The Gorbals in Scotland was once a strong local community which, the group felt, was destroyed by the building of new housing estates 'the product' of such new design — was young people with nothing to do.

Changes in housing benefit are likely to push people out of city and will, the group felt, result in tremendous disturbance. Public housing is no longer for life a sense was conveyed of the hidden effects — that it will 'destroy children's chance of having a consistent learning opportunity'. As such members viewed this as being 'destructive and damaging' — social engineering at its worse, delivered without thought. It was felt that

this conveyed a paradox of governmental intent: a belief in freedom but at the same time the increasing practice of issuing decrees.

2. _Structures breaking down_
The issue of 'cheating' was introduced — benefit cheats and people sub letting their council houses to make money. The government was seen as targeting these practices rather than, one member commented, the 'cheats' at the top. 'Cheats' were felt to be everywhere because everyone wants to be a winner — losers have no sympathy. A recollection by one member of a 5 year old girl calling her mother a 'loser' in public — another participant commented that they would never have got away with this behaviour as a child.

Child protection practice was discussed. One member commented that people seemed to be so concerned about their own futures that it becomes easier not to see child protection incidents or not to report them — because there is a sense that nothing can be done even if you can see it. All the resources have gone, swept away in deeper governmental cuts which have enormously reduced whole layers of support and public sector services.

However the group then considered that within this reduction other services are coming to the fore — smaller projects creative projects some using the new ideas about attachment bringing new ideas in — in contrast to the wider context of depression and the shrinking of wider resources. These the group felt provided more encouraging signs alongside the wider sense of depression. The movement to reclaim social work was one example given of a positive shift in professions in the face of increasing pressures.

An incident on a train was recounted where a member of staff who was collecting cups had to ask a manager whether he could give a glass of wine. People feel powerless. Even the Tavistock is under attack although another member pointed out that the Anna Freud Centre is another example of an organization which is still finding and supporting new ideas.

The Tavistock, Churches and schools all potential sites of support are increasingly ignored leaving a question in the group about where the current centres of community really are? Institutions have failed abysmally — where are the moral guardians now? It was acknowledged that some like the Archbishop of Canterbury still speak out but other voices are no longer heard or remain muted. A sense of putting hands around a flickering or 'guttering' flame to keep it alight — which could both represent religious and psychoanalytical views — was expressed.

One member spoke of volunteering but in so doing feelings overwhelmed by the clamour and demand — it was enough, she commented and concluded, to 'put you off' altogether.

3. _Transition and a search for belonging_
The group discussion gave a sense of connection and disconnection, revealing a preoccupation with an absence of social networks and leaving a question: who is at home here? One member recalled that on the tube they were increasingly aware of many different languages being spoken sometimes 6 all at the same time. Although another member wondered whether this really represented a change; recalling that in the 1950's things really were not that different — at different times of the day, in the 1950's they stated that you would hear different languages being spoken as different groups were going to work or school or passing through.

Another member recounted recently being lost in Finsbury Park and asking people for help with directions. Everyone was very helpful, but no one could help. They were also, if not lost, then also strangers to this place just passing through in transit to somewhere else — ultimately no one knew enough of the area to give directions. There was a sense of everyone being together all in annonymised space, all in transition.

Another member recounted how strangers were always nice on buses. Paradoxically it was not felt to be as 'nice' in the work place; one member commented of their experience of being a project worker going into a new workplace and being badly treated, she felt that the sense of community that can be found outside did not exist in work. People are nicer on buses — where everyone is in transition.

One member suggested that there was a sense of the whole world being in transition and London was increasingly feeling like 'one enormous airport' where people were always just passing through. London is home but not home. In London you expect to be on your own. And then a question; As an adult do we really need a home? Perhaps without a settled 'home' a life in transit offers one huge adventure where you can go out and explore without feeling bound to one space no longer having to think in terms of a family or a 'secure base'. But then the other side the coin: one member recalled that in London there is high levels of isolation and perhaps linked to this — suicide.

And then to Europe which was also felt to be in transition. Times of austerity and the huge debt problems of many European countries have still not been resolved. One member asked "where will it all end up?" Perhaps with Greece having to leave the European Union another speculated. Another suggested that Greece itself was undergoing a shift from a more traditional culture of close family ties and networks to a 'place of movement': a culture of looser family networks and social relationships — represented the group felt by London.

Kinds of homelessness were considered by the group; those that exist in London (with people on the streets) and those that exist in Europe (Greece: a state collapsing completely, leaving some Greek members of the group feeling that it was becoming hard to have a sense of a secure home or secure state in their minds). The group concluded from this that a fundamental disturbance exists in the place where home was once located.

Someone spoke of becoming interested in family history perhaps as a way of rediscovering something of 'home'. But alongside this search for stability or a root there was a global sense of 'fragility' suggested by 'bird flu' — the whole world the group summarized felt like if could just go 'bing'.

It was felt by one member that we were shifting to a new way of grouping together but there still seemed to be a longing for attachment. As a consultant, one member, considered how a great connectedness came through work and through relationships with clients. Others recalled connectedness through their studies or through family relationships but also there was a sense of loss of other areas of connectedness which were somehow not taking place.

4. _Challenge to authority and the emergence of something new?_
Where austerity (or government policies bite) people are sharing more — an example was given of Greece; where people are leaving tickets on buses so that others can use them. A sign of instantaneous group action it was speculated, unplanned but tremendously organized and collectively coherent. One member linked this to the

'occupy movement' — in Britain — outside St. Pauls. (A grouping which it was stated included 'Tavistock people'). Again the image of a flickering flame representing, this time, goodness — the murder was discussed at Salford which quickly mobilised a community into action. The group considered whether there is a sense of community that is innate which we all carry with us, which can be mobilised quickly under certain conditions or pressures. One member described this as the 'common good' a space or a quality in us all which allows for natural collective mobilisation.

The riots were remembered and one member recalled that at the height of the riots there was an outcry because a child had been mugged. We seem to understand the riots but not the mugging. There is a collective sense of shame that some of the people harmed were outsiders not from London. Linked to this the group wondered what the outsider does not see — what gets hidden, what gets left out? One member recalled people giving time to support others with reading and concluded there is still much kindness in London to be found.

One member recalled a Dustman who found the hospital had lost his scan — he just carried on, just got on with things without complaint. Walked over and just carrying on the opposite it seemed of the collective group action described above. There is, the group commented, a wider sense of hunger where people no longer feel able to express what they really feel. It feels, someone commented that we are trying to find a new way through negativity and hopelessness while at the same time managing our vulnerability, in the hope and faith of finding 'good spirit'. It was, the group concluded, at the moment at least, not an easy channel to tune into or to find.

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.

<u>Analysis and Hypothesis 1</u>

Denial, loss, sadness and rage

Analysis: Members spoke of their feelings of sadness at the loss of a way of life that was known and familiar commenting that it has taken three years of grief to get to a state of anger that can feel in any way constructive: It has taken three years to get to anger that can do anything, anger that can exist that does not get lost in denial, depression or suicide (which the group felt was also a form of protest). The root of the anger the group felt was twofold — anger at the loss of a previous way of being and anger at repression and corruption. It is this fury that is erupting throughout society members believed.

Paradoxically because of our fury we are terrified and this forces society into a series paradoxes; that in an increasingly individualised world where whole communities are breaking down we need somehow to come together, in spaces where we can feel even momentarily connected. We are forced to seek alternative leaders — even though we do

not trust leadership and those in power we still wish to feel controlled and therefore mobilise leaders to contain our anger.

The domination of economic models effectively cancels out alternatives which appear to be few in number. And yet we are deeply troubled and disillusioned with these current and historical structures and find ourselves in a state of flux — pushed to the edge of one paradigm and staring at a void we cannot fill. We hope for rebirth but we do not perceive in what way birth may come nor what form it will take.

The greatest disillusionment is perhaps with ourselves, and a growing realisation of what we had previously taken for granted. And because of this our individual guilt at having lived well is pushed into benefit cheats and bankers who are blamed for our greed and the debts we have also built up and accumulated when things were going well. Societally we blame other nations who are also projected into and onto and then punished and humiliated for the sins and guilt of other nations such as Germany.

Hypothesis: Because of massive global change resulting in the loss of what is familiar at all levels of society, members of society experience processes of mourning, shock, grief and anger, they are going through a process of loss and mourning, the result of which is a withdrawal from previous institutional relationships and commitments.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

*The acceptance of loss and the emergence
of something new but unknown*

Analysis: The collapse of institutions that previously supported our dependency needs have left huge rents and gaps in the societal fabric. The continued sense of failed dependency proliferates and the resulting disillusionment forces us to continue to search for alternative or new sources of containment — to contain our anger and resentment — and to provide a new source of meaning. This searching perhaps represents a pining in the face of significant losses, one of which is the loss of previous identities, which is also experienced as the loss of a way of life.

Our disillusionment, part of a developmental process forces us to consider alternative models of being and containment as we find ourselves in flight from the uncertainties of a post paradigm world. Perhaps we are witnessing the collapse of western models and ways of life while the emergence of other groups continues.

Even the most primary identifications are unclear or fragile. We feel homeless, stateless, in transition to a destination that is increasingly frightening, uncertain, and unclear. Winston Churchill's words were recalled by one member; 'what we got is better than nothing' and yet it feels hard to find a place in this changing societal order, and somehow we are left as sea not knowing where we now fit or belong. However within this transition we are forced to acknowledge previous deeply felt losses and to consider new possibilities by tentatively seeking out new ways of connecting and being.

Hypothesis: Because of the constant and unprecedented change in society; members of society appear to be re negotiating their own identities and identifications, they deal with this by retreating into self and at the same time searching for where they may now belong.

Convener: Simon Tucker