

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Britain and the World at the Dawn of 2013
Report of a New Year's Listening Post
held on 9th January in London



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 collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

- a) Control or impotence?
- b) Institutional corruption
- c) Blame and punishment

a) Control or impotence?

The bush fires in Australia and the flooding in parts of England seem to be evidence of a lack of forethought and planning to avert such disasters. Of course some disasters such as the typhoon in the Philippines are too sudden to plan for.

Over Christmas my godsons (15 and 17) were on their computers; my friend said: "When I go home I won't have missed my favourite TV as I have programmed them in." I thought it would be terrible if you never missed anything! Virtual world and reality.

Something about what you can control – virtual, yes; hurricane, no. In the NHS where I work we have been concerned about reporting against work targets. Someone asked whether the data collection is reliable enough. An enormous amount of work has gone into data processing, but the data is often made up to meet requirements.

Perhaps data collection is an escape from reality as much as watching Strictly Come Dancing.

Some members of the public see Strictly as more real than people who are flooded out.

Escape into fantasy rather than face the horrors.

Perhaps because we feel we cannot do anything about it.

Climate change is an area I work in. (Rosemary Randle's book 'The Id and the Echo'). Culpability and impotence. Hate people who make us feel impotent. Hate being impotent. It doesn't occur to my mother that she should do anything about climate change. Once you couldn't talk about sex around the dinner table. Now you cannot talk about climate change. Link between displacement and impotence.

This room is unnecessarily hot!

Talk today about cyber attack on our defence industry. We are in a hugely competitive world with new nations joining the competition. We are a creative nation, but in a global competition with China which does nothing on climate change.

Depends who is at the dinner table. Younger generation would talk about climate change. Growth is a nonsense. There is also more collaboration now as well as competition.

I've worked in China – and they want to collaborate. Ordinary people want the same things. They want to be happy. When I was in France they expected us to riot over the raising of university fees – in France they would have been on the streets. But we didn't. In France they have very low expectations of politicians – Dominique Straus-Kahn didn't come as a surprise.

But France is not so diverse as the UK.

I'm not saying they are better. Discourse of capitalism is moribund.

I was thinking of my impotence – not being able to give enough thought. Family issues very difficult. Sold our house as we are downsizing – in intermediate accommodation. Full of ideas I cannot do anything about. If we could get through the denial, we could do something about Europe and the financial situation. Cameron is a mixture of good qualities, but underneath he is stuck and useless. Complaints that the Americans have told us off over wanting to leave Europe – but they are right.

The elders used to provide wisdom for society. Cameron is too young and inexperienced.

b) Institutional corruption

Something very corrupt going on across all institutions which we ought to be able to do something about – like the police.

Not all institutions.

Corruption of performance management in many institutions.

Performance management which does not capture real performance.

The old saying: “You get the police you deserve”! Last two Commissioners of Police in London were pushed out. How are we trying to use them? Hugh Orde who served in N Ireland was perhaps politically unacceptable for London – told it how it is!

I almost expect corruption in the police, but not in the NHS.

Danny Boyle's portrayal of the NHS at the Olympics was fantasy.

Is the NHS too big? It's introduction removed the many different small hospitals – now it's gigantic, not on a human scale.

I heard Tessa Jowell quoting Milburn: “Take your foot off the gas, and you will miss your goals.” I thought yes – fear instilled from above scared people into “meeting targets”.

The idea in the NHS that things will go drastically wrong if we don't set clear goals.

Alaska Disaster: Consultants to BP kept emphasising Health & Safety regulations should be followed, thinking that would change the organisational culture. But from the top the message continued unchanged “Keep pumping the oil”. Top management take their eye off the real issues. Downfall of the establishment – difficult to hide problems now. Plebgate: Mitchell issue – they were caught out by the CCTV. Why did they ignore it?

Stafford hospital – “doctors bury their mistakes”!

Yes but now you can dig them up and get DNA evidence.

c) Blame and punishment

We have all this clever technology, but we have not evolved to keep up with it. Reminds me of Lady Macbeth – The Savile enquiry launched but we end up with a sideshow which distracts us from the reality of child abuse.

Now I am fully retiring, I’m feeling out of things, but I sense others of you are working in situations of fear and anxiety. It feels as if there is a need to punish, because response has been so slow. So find someone to blame.

We blamed people at Stafford hospital, but they have now been re-employed elsewhere in the NHS!

We have run out of people to punish. These are repeating institutional failures.

When I was a ward sister many years ago there was a definite local culture by which patients were cared for. I took over a ward where the sister had not kept up with the changes taking place. It needs a lot of effort to bring about change. It’s a question of how you treat people – not just in hospital but in everyday life.

Savile was an abuser until he died. This was not confined to the 70’s – shocking that he didn’t ever stop targeting vulnerable people.

Establishment covered it up – as they did with the Hillsborough tragedy. But today you cannot cover things up – it comes out eventually.

The course of political correctness – coincides with the Coalition who are resetting the clock backwards. The intention was to treat people properly – and people had worked hard to change the culture. Now it’s all being dumped – back to bullying and suppressed abuse of people.

Coalition dumped Health and Safety.

Have a go at you.

Lots of bad things happened under the previous government – Rebecca Brooks.

Politics has taken on the colour of what’s happening anyway.

It seems now to be accepted. I’m retired now so not fighting so much. Are we not corrupt as individuals?

Party politics is now irrelevant because of globalisation – and corruption is rife. But people are coming together in community groups to find new ways. I feel very powerless. I’m supervising someone who works in child protection. She is being blamed for a child being abused – rather than the parent responsible.

There is displacement – more and more – against denial – it’s much more difficult now for institutions to deny. Displacement of one sin into another. The Republicans gave us a lot of pathology – sins of money changed into sins of sex – Clinton. Savile is a corporate problem which cannot be denied.

The Coalition’s Ronseal reference – which party is the gloss and which the stain!

American money – challenged – new David Bowie song: ‘Where are we now?’

Danger that we get too dependent. Landfill is used much less now – we are recycling more. It's not easy to recognise the positives when we are surrounded by bad stuff. The Coalition has made movement – progress but not fast enough – Europe has affected us. Difficult not to be depressed.

Eco issues very frightening. We cannot reverse ice cap melting. Panic in old, rich imperial world about the new order. No one knows how to handle this.

Not enough thinking about the good potentiality.

China will soon be the new world leader. They are competent. But their human rights record is not good, if they are to be the policeman of the world.

It was not only China but Britain which invaded Tibet.

We are the same!

We are different!

Which measure are we using on landfill? Big society credited with food banks! Not trusting the good news.

This is linked up – corruption is individual and corporate. Book 'Treasure Islands', (tax havens and the men who stole the world) Nicholas Shaxson.

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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Loss of memory, wisdom

Analysis: The speed of scientific advance makes it hard to keep up. The digital age means that elders often feel out of their comfort zone in dealing with the latest technological advances. There are few historical reference points for this technology and so we get trapped in the immediate present and lose sight of the lessons from the past which could be relevant.

This seems particularly the case in the way we order our institutions and economic responses. There is a dumbing down in the current situation which means that history is ignored and wisdom from the past is forgotten. Capitalist society tends to isolate us – the individual as consumer – whereas in previous generations people were often members of groups where they could discuss issues together and develop creative solutions to problems faced. This was also true of tribal societies where the oral tradition maintained the sense of tribal continuity and identity. In a global context, without this membership of groups, and the decline in national identity, we can lose our sense of meaning and our potency. It is not yet clear whether virtual groups are able to replicate this opportunity.

There does not seem to be the political will or social demand for genuine economic change and concerted effort to avert climate disaster.

Hypothesis: Because it is too frightening to learn from experience/history, members of society displace their feelings and activities on current distractions, with the result that we are already dead (– so get over it!!)

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Where is authority in a global context?

Analysis: Shakespeare's play 'Timon of Athens' deals with the subject of debt and greed which foreshadows the nature of the collapse of the financial system in 2008, following the withdrawal of support for Lehman Brothers. Guilt and debt have a common root in the German and Dutch languages and may connect to the unwillingness of Chancellor Merkel to support the issue of a European Bond. Does the German experience of hyper inflation, and the Nazi support of Keynes, colour the way they exercise their leadership in Europe?

There is widespread bewilderment about the nature of the financial crisis and a lack of trust over the severe restrictions imposed in the name of austerity and paying off the national debt. The global nature of the economic system means that individual nations struggle to extricate themselves from the mess. The UK's dependence on the European market is an example of this.

The experience in London is different in some ways from other parts of the UK such as the West Midlands. While London is an innovative global financial centre, other regions are in economic decline, quite traditional and in cultural isolation. Young people who cannot find work sometimes get caught up in a bubble of enjoyment: "This is screwed – so we will do our own thing". We are seeing on the one hand off shore tax havens and the extreme wealth of a small minority ('The New Few' by Ferdinand Mount) while on the other hand the killing of employment. The one thing which is not questioned seems to be the neoliberal economics which got us into the mess.

Within this context there are some signs of new beginnings, with initiatives such as crowd funding and the development of campaigns for the common good. Obama's reelection speech was impressive for its positive message. However, in the UK there is much distrust of political parties, the police and the media.

Hypothesis: Because the electorate had lost faith in the political system, we elected a hybrid two party coalition, with the result that we have a government with no authority to govern.

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