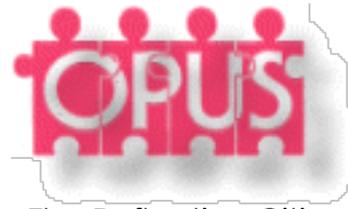


## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

### Ireland and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



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.

Following a short silence, the first contribution referenced the shootings that had taken place at the Charlie Hebdo offices and Danmartin-en-Goele in Paris during the past two days. Members spoke about how they had been glued to the television news and one member talked of being preoccupied about family members living in the city. A member said: "you need to be brave to try to put some thinking and understanding into what has happened."

Members then began making links to the events that have galvanised and preoccupied Ireland over the last few months. Reference was made to:

- the anti-water charge marches (up to 100,000 people attended Right2Water rallies across the country on 11 December);
- homelessness (on 1<sup>st</sup> December John Corrie was found dead in a doorway beside Leinster House (the Irish houses of parliament) provoking a large public reaction and actions on provisions for those out of home);
- the lack of hospital beds (the number of patients on trolleys in accident and emergency reached a record 601 across the country two days before the Listening Post, provoking media attention and a public response of despair, upset and anger).

A member spoke of what she saw as the angry responses and the public demand for immediate answers from the legislators and managers and a lack of tolerance for the analysis of causes. The image of the iceberg was identified: we are preoccupied with the tip and perhaps don't want to look underneath.

Another member spoke of feeling swamped by what is presented in the media: the big picture, events, sound bites, rage and crises. A member said how she discovered that once the latest crisis can be broken down into its constituent and connected parts and analysed she finds her anxiety reduces, she can breathe again, think again. It is then possible to see possibilities, hope, to see a way of responding and finding appropriate solutions, rather than reacting.

A member said how, over the last few days, she has been reading about France's colonial past, its political and economic allegiances and she wondered what else is going on? We are bombarded with just the event, the tip of the iceberg. "We know so little of the story or event really and not enough to connect or relate to it or know about it."

A member spoke of feeling conflicted about the two brothers, (Cherif and Said Kouachi, identified as the Islamist attackers in Paris and understood to have been killed that day). "What had happened for them?" he asked. He reminded the group of the many killings carried out in Ireland by the IRA and SAS in the 1970s, 80s and 90s and how many had involved families.

The notion (and fear) of marginalisation or being marginalised and how present it is in our lives, the *périphérique*, was talked about which led the group to talking about power.

A member said that 95% of Irish pay the property tax, 60% pay the water charges. What happens to those who don't? There have been many issues concerning use or abuse of power in Ireland recently. The anti-water charge protestors feel powerful. A member said if there had been a protest march against the anti-water charge group she would have joined it, but there wasn't. In December in Co Mayo, the residential respite and day service for adults with an intellectual disability, Aras Attracta, was the subject of an RTE (Irish national television) undercover report which showed the abuse of residents by some staff. The programme provoked a national outcry and the staff shown on the film were suspended and vilified.

Returning to the Paris shootings a member said what had impressed on him most was the target taken by the Islamists – they attacked a magazine, their attack was cultural. The group began to talk about identity and what happens to us when something important about our identity is ridiculed. It was pointed out that we are very privileged a member suggested that it is a wonder, given our capacity to be violent and our capacity to marginalise and ridicule that we manage to contain so much violent, aggressive feeling and not act out.

"I'm struck by the individual tragedies: the four women who died in the

car accident in Co Kildare this week. I passed by the spot on my way here and I wondered if the car had been hit by a gust of wind. How fragile we all are, maybe it was just the wind."

A member talked about the German sociologist Norbert Elias's 1939 book *The Civilising Process* in which he analyses the historical processes of the relationship between individuals and society in western societies. These processes include political authority, physical power, psychological implications including "self-restraint".

This reminded another member of living in a small isolated rural town in a country outside Europe. On one occasion, a young man who was being ridiculed by another, went home, got a knife, came back and killed the boy ridiculing him. It reminded this member of the power that is below the surface.

Returning to Charlie Hebdo, a member commented: **"The magazine is often scurrilous and offensive but is accepted in France as a form of satire that holds the aspect of liberty. It is so important and symbolic for the French identity to have the right to provoke"**

A member reminded us that Charlie Hebdo couldn't operate in Ireland under the Constitution which includes a clause on blasphemy. It was noted that there is an ongoing campaign for its removal.

A member expressed her shock at the recent behaviour of the radical left and right in the recent European elections. In Germany, people marched outside a Jewish museum with the sign "turn on the gas". "The EU is not so strong. The discourse of hatred is increasing. It is really worrying for the future if we can't find a way of social cohesion". She named the statistics for people living in poverty and social exclusion in EU which show an alarming increase from 115 million in 2010 to 124 million in 2014. "Social inequality is increasing and we know that people in poverty are easier to convince into radicalism and fundamentalism." She argued that less is being done now to protect the vulnerable. EU politics has become more about finance, parties and representatives rather than social issues, participatory democracy and democratic agency.

The concept of high intensity democracy was introduced by one member. A concept of sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos, it describes how active participation and political actions is limited by its local field of action, making it difficult to confront or engage at national and international political levels.

Group spoke about a particularly vulnerable group in Ireland, children, who, in the economic downturn have been neglected. A member reminded us that only now is the government looking at the Child and

Family Relationships Bill. (The proposed legislation acknowledges the various family types in which children live and seeks to address discrimination faced currently by children in non-marital families.) A member spoke about her experience in India where the educational ideas for disadvantaged children is much more advanced than in Ireland. She wondered why the Loreto Nuns in Ireland, who educate children of the advantaged in Irish society, don't run education for the disadvantaged as they do in India. In Calcutta they run schools where children can stay safe, sleep in and get fed, why not here in Ireland? she asked.

A member said that it feels now that in Ireland we can only do our tasks, our job, have agency, once everything else, the structures, are in place. "When I began teaching we had a stick of chalk and 40 children. Now the expectation is that in order to do anything we must have everything in place before the teaching can happen."

This led group onto a theme of systems, a sense that systems are collapsing or failing. An example was given of a hospital appointment system where every client is given an appointment at 2pm. "So if you are not there by 12 noon you likely won't get seen for hours. The systems look after the needs of the staff rather than those of the client group. It feels like there isn't a possibility to change the system, we can only complain, the system leads. We get angry and frustrated as if the system is in charge. It is so hard to get past the complaining. There is always an expectation that someone else will do what needs to be done."

Group wondered if part of the resistance to agency is that we are being presented and asked to react to the superficial and/or macro level, what is above ground. We are moved and move from event to event, not stopping long enough at any to have time to research, explore and think.

"People want and are looking for security" said a member.

A member spoke about feeling angry with the EU for making decisions on a financial rather than social basis. There are less people in the systems to carry out the work. 2,500 posts have been taken out of education. A member mentioned American political economist Mark Blythe's book *Austerity, the History of A Dangerous Idea*. He presents a political and historical analysis of the current economic slump and challenges the notion that austerity works **for** society.

One member spoke of being struck by the negative bias of our preoccupations. She reminded us that there are positive things happening. This was responded to by a member who said that she has been running leadership training programmes over the past number of years. In the financial boom years there were many leadership

opportunities but it was hard to find people willing to fill them while more recently, in the bust years, there has been a stampede to leadership roles.

“Maybe some of us have too much?” Said a member.

The group theme shifted to the notion of belonging, globalisation and different levels of knowing. There is so much going on, so much to know, so much we feel we need to be told, we need to know. We can communicate with so many through technologies, but while we get the gist, the information, we avoid intimacy, emotion, engagement and a deeper level of knowing. If we don't talk we lose a lot, big world events become more important than the people sitting beside you. One member described how he sat beside his manager at lunch but, despite this opportunity, his manager remained on his mobile phone throughout lunch. Yet we all know how much we learn from chatting at the water cooler. “I wondered to myself, how could he manage me?” Perhaps he manages tasks rather than people. The big picture excludes so much interpersonal knowing, material to which we could connect.

## **Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

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

We broke into two groups and identified the following themes from part one:

### **Group One:**

1. Marginalisation – a lot of shame about it
2. Functionality versus humanistic
3. Boundary awareness: it's too much to kill someone. You only know a boundary when you breach it.
4. Taking responsibility: the maturity stage of our culture: adolescent. History of blaming someone else. How are the French going to manage what has happened?
5. Visual versus not visual: we don't see the iceberg that is underneath the water

### **Group Two:**

1. Change provokes fear and vulnerability but also expectations and possibilities
2. Macro (top down, dominating, strategies, systems, plans, bureaucracy, institutions, representative, not listening,

disconnected, all knowing) versus micro (bottom up, quality, relatedness, connections, vulnerability, participatory, not knowing but curious to know). It has become about supporting the system rather than the people who use it.

3. Equality – inequality: where does the reward go? The rich expect to get richer and the poor are getting poorer.
4. High intensity democracy is missing. Focus is on symbols such as protest marches, sound bites, perceptions, images rather than real, sustainable solutions. Our democracy is representative rather than participatory.

### **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. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses:

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Individuality, Identity and Belonging**

We wonder how we can manage what we are being told via all our media devices, how we can hear and see without being swamped by events, sucked into the predominant discourses or colonised by the big picture. One sense of belonging and connection comes with knowing what others' know but the preoccupation seemed to be in the internal conflict of how to belong to a world in which events are constantly happening and which we want to have a view while at the same time maintain an independence that can enable us to think, talk, reflect, analyse and leave space for looking below the surface.

#### **Hypothesis**

We want both a sense of belonging and a wish to be independent. However, while a sense of belonging provides a sense of privilege and security, we are fearful of what we do to those on the margins, on the outside, the *périphérique*. It is a dangerous, shameful and ridiculed position in which we, as the marginalised or the privileged can become dangerous as defenders or attackers. In the light of this, our hope lies in our wish to understand more, to know more and to think more and not to be drawn into the dominant discourses.

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2: A Hope for Change and a Fear of Change**

In Ireland there has been a collapse of old established systems such as the church, the banks, national political parties, a breaking up of the rigid institutional blocks. The increase in independent T.D.'s over the last few years (17% in the current Dail) represents something of our wish to be independent, more personally active. There has been a slaughtering of sacred cows and with that has emerged a sense of possibility and excitement for a more high intensity democracy.

The crises that are now emerging in Ireland come with an increased expectation that they will be justly dealt with, partly as a consequence of our experience of the EU. But these crises are complex, more fluid, messier and require more complex responses and solutions which can lead to frustrations born out of things not being dealt with promptly and in a way that we think is right, when we seek change and change doesn't happen as we want it. Can we mobilise our independent agency to assist in and tolerate the frustration of the solving or will we continue to complain? Solutions are hundreds of small connections and knowings taken over time, but does that process feel a safe one, can we wait that long? People are off their knees now but do we feel it as a mob, a free-for-all? Can we sustain our agency and authority or are we threatened by it?

Ireland's recent anti-water charge demonstrations are an example of our mobilisation and waking up our re-engagement in seeking change. However, the anti-water charge demonstrations also represent the mob that makes us fearful.

## **Hypothesis**

A sense of helplessness or disenfranchisement, representative of the distance between the legislators at national and international levels and our own felt selves, has become frustration and a desire for action. While there is an excitement about feeling active, there is also a deep fear that the anger of the marginalised will not, or cannot be contained.

## **Analysis and Hypothesis 3**

### **Winning and Losing: Can Human Connection be Sustained?**

Alongside the breakdown of systems and change comes a sense of expectation and possibility. In a search for a high intensity democracy, we have created groups that are less rigid, groups that are flexible enough to follow trends in order to be able to constantly change and be reinvented. We can move in and out of membership, the groups require less commitment. However, as a result, these groups are less secure and sustainable.

The trend in youth services is that young people will attend groups but refuse group membership. Perhaps they are holding onto their right to choose not to attend, not to join and their right to leave, to change their group and allegiance. Perhaps what is seen, the visual communication is important. The group or idea we are seen to belong to can identify us as a winner or a loser. Our old system of intellectual, adversarial arguments, debating societies, when someone wins and another loses, turns its back on the murkiness and ambivalence.

However, our need to belong also conflicts with our need to be a winner, not a loser. To be seen to belong seems more important than actual belonging with all that belonging entails. In the struggle for being seen visually as the winner and having solutions, the not knowing is discarded as the loser. In our fear of not knowing or being identified with or as the loser, we perhaps still seek a representative who knows, a personality or a political party, rather than working with our own ambivalence.

The conflict is now about ideas and ideologies, not groups or countries. But ideas and ideologies can't sustain us. Without commitment (membership), groups have to find new (external) ways of surviving. Human connection sustains us and groups can't be sustained or sustaining without commitment and boundaries. Does this represent the anti-group sentiment, the anti-social, the rise and rise of individualism? Can we trust that the need for human connection will sustain us or is the fear of/desire for individualism and hedonism too great?

### **Hypothesis**

With hope and in fear we are looking for new systems/groups that we can identify with and belong to but which allow us our individual identity without seeking to define or suffocate us but that can also provide a sense of security.

**Convenor: Jude Bowles**