"Britain and the World Spring 2003"

Report of a Listening Post
held on Wednesday 30th April
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm
College Hall, University of London,
Malet Street, London WC1E 7HZ

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. On this occasion, themes can be drawn together as the following three interrelated statements:

(a) *Globalisation.*
The scale and complexity of globalisation resulted in a sort of paralysis of thinking and not knowing. The notion of finding in the small what can't be comprehended in the large was explored. But largely because of the sheer scale of what is happening, members asked, 'how can we make individual voices heard? Other questions included; 'Who can we trust to lead us to manage it (globalisation)? 'What has happened to freedom (of speech), influence (who is the World Health Organisation), and control (who is controlling)? It was seen as the imposition of reality by the (global) powerful on the less powerful. There was a denial of complexity (globally) but a real struggle at the individual level. There was seen to be a conflict between global and local, too difficult to deal at global level. Amid the confusion one member said that it seems that I am defending myself at the expense of others. Global is a mad world.

(b) *Death & Insecurity.*
There were frequent references to death and to insecurity. To destruction, cutting up and mutilation of bodies. It seems likely that this is a resultant effect of the theme developed above. The world was viewed as a frightening place both locally and globally. And the death 'of a way of life' was seen to pose a great challenge. It was felt that there was a struggle around the very concept of democracy. There was a similar struggle around the issues of truth and reality. One member said that it is difficult to hold on to one's mind. I am constantly thinking what is the truth. There seems no correlation between what the members of society think and what Government tells us. Body parts causes me to relate to disintegration There was considerable paranoia over SARS and aids. It was felt that the destructiveness of guilt left us with no where to go.

(c) *Hopelessness / Hope.*
There was a degree of desperation in wanting to know as an individual how we can be heard. The experience was one of isolation and disenfranchisement. One member said, 'I have no idea of being useful'. For others, hopelessness was seen as scary. Reality (as presented) seems to confirm the distortion of reality. The effect of helplessness and lack of hope is to simply look after one's own self-interest. At the same time there was a need to hold on to hope. The importance of hope was acknowledged strongly but there was an added problem of how to keep it alive at the same time being aware of the reality that blocks it. It would seem that rather than take one's own authority, we are waiting for a critical mass to develop. Perhaps the recognition of impossibility is a necessary step to new knowing. Overall there was seen a need to compensate, to recover, to repair.

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. Again, there was a lack of clear, easily identifiable issues but there was, nonetheless, a lively and vigorous struggle to make sense of the Listening Post experience. This analysis has been distilled into the following three interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: Death and Insecurity. We reflected on the fact that the Listening Post had opened with a succession of members talking about death and illness or injury. These were mainly of experiences at the personal level and were seen as displacements of concern for death at other levels. As events developed the pre-occupations became more centred on changes, mainly at a global level, and how these were leading to the death of a way of life. It was felt that the weakness of the UN and other (world) bodies meant that there was no satisfactory container. The death and mutilation in Iraq was referred to and it was felt that we were using Ali (the young Iraqi severely injured in the allied bombing), for our own self-gratification. In effect, we turn him into one of us. This was seen as a distortion or perversion. It is not that we don't know, rather that we suppress reality. In effect it is perversion a turning away - making bad good. Additionally, the fear of death seems to lead to phantasies about the 'new way of life' that was being developed but which we could not comprehend. Phantasies of a new empire, an omnipotent, all powerful, all controlling new world empire. One where looting (by the powerful) was the only way to satisfy primitive impulses - get as much as you can. Or, as in the Cadbury advert which is seen to play on the greed of young people, a greedy new empire gobbling up everything at expense of third world. And all of us being in total denial of others and unable to see where the goodies are made (third world).

Hypothesis: Faced with strong feelings of loss and helplessness we experience the world as a fragmented and frightening place and this arouses in us feelings of extreme anxiety which mobilises primitive phantasies connected with death. In some ways this is too hard to bear and we deal with the guilt of the part we play in this fragmentation by

splitting and locating evil and hatred in the powerful (The USA) and by perversion whereby we turn bad into good.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Globalisation. The extent and activities concerning globalisation are simply not understood, and in some situations are seen as beyond comprehension. Members were not really sure what it actually was that is happening at the global level and it could only be named as some sort of 'global disturbance'. There was a search to find something but members were not sure what the reality was they were looking for. Yet there was an awareness that whatever the 'global disturbance', it was having a mammoth effect on our lives. In the absence of knowledge members fantasised about the effects of globalisation. For example; a fantasy of sameness (as with MacDonalds), a world where there is no differentiation. A fantasy of flat management, a world where there is no need for leaders. A fantasy that there must be a file on all of us somewhere (shades of Orwell). That we are threatened by a black hole and other environmental and ecological horrors.

Hypothesis: The sheer scale of the influence and control at the global level coupled with a great deal of ignorance of what is actually involved leads to a sort of paranoid activity which views globalisation as a threat to mankind. This manifests itself in concerns for civilisation (aids & sars), for the planet (the ozone layer) and even being swallowed up by a black hole. It also seems that the anxiety associated with globalisation has led to a regression into primitive phantasies whereby greed and envy have replaced a caring and loving society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Hopelessness / Hope. Throughout the Listening Post there were frequent references to an inability to think for ourselves To do so was seen as frightening. There was a phantasy (or even belief), that as individuals or even as members of society we could not influence. In the face of mad destructiveness it was impossible to take your own authority. No one seems able to predict or know what's going to happen. Sometimes the information we are receiving makes no sense, sometimes the sheer quantity is overwhelming. For example, it was stated of the internet that when you want a drink you get a water fall. Yet, through this real and intense feeling of hopelessness and despair there still existed a feeling of hope. It seemed important that somehow there was a need to keep hope alive. In particular, hope was derived from the Listening Post itself. The very act of trying to think together in a coherent way was seen as a positive and helpful experience. Through this group, we were seen to be keeping thinking alive in the face of non-thinking and at the same time, keeping hope alive. It is a real struggle to make sense of the world as experienced

Hypothesis: In a world where little makes sense, and where members of society feel they have no influence on their lives, it seems that one option is to regress to the sort of primitive behaviour described in Hypothesis 1 & 2 above, as a defence against the anxiety they are suffering. Another approach is to try to stay in the depressive position

and to confront the anxiety in a creative manner. 'To keep the thinking alive in the face of non-thinking'. It would seem that given the current societal dynamics, members of society are constantly moving between more primitive and reality based thinking.

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