

**"Britain and the World
Spring 2004"**

**Report of a Listening Post held on
Wednesday 21st April 2004
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 Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Of the twenty or so themes identified by the members, these have been distilled into four major themes.

a) Reproduction and Ageing - Of Mice and Men

The listening post opened with several members expressing preoccupations regarding their concerns about scientific developments in reproduction and ageing. These included a news item about a mouse being created from the genetic material of two female mice, which provided a focus for a theme of the erosion of traditional male / female differences. Members felt that developments in genetics and reproductive medicine have radically altered perceptions of what constitutes 'normal' reproduction, and the part played by men in particular. One member reported that half the medical profession seemed to be preoccupied with finding new methods of reproduction, whilst the other half were trying to find new ways of preventing conception. The members expressed concern that implications for the future were experienced along a range between alarm, anger, uncertainty and optimism. There was a strong sub-theme in which members wished for strong masculine roles in the face of real or apparent threats to traditional masculinity.

b) Hedonism and a Flight from Reality

The experience of members was of deep unease that members of society believe they could avoid the consequences of their actions, and remain in a permanent state of denial of adult responsibility. It was the experience of members that there was a sense of a growing gulf between different belief systems, and the rapid decline in the security of a dominant orthodoxy (white, middle class, Christian, male) which had at least provided a shared morality and culture. Many examples were offered of groups within society apparently engaged in avoidance of complexity and difficulty. The growth of 'gated communities' were experienced as attempts to put up physical barriers to keep out these forces. Attempts by older people to hold on to their youth, were experienced

by members as attempts at avoiding the responsibilities of adulthood. There was a search for the 'elixir of life'. Many people work long hours to achieve a notion of happiness based on material wealth and social status, even to the point of risking their health.

c) Fragmented Authority

Members expressed their concerns that authority is being exercised in increasingly contradictory ways. It was members' experience that politicians alternated between authoritarian and centralised decision making followed by un-thought out laissez-faire measures. Members identified examples such as the relaxation in gambling laws or turning over decisions to the people in the form of a referendum. At the same time, members felt that there was an ambivalent attitude to authority. On the one hand, there is growing anti-social behaviour in the young, but also a longing for strong leadership as a reassurance against uncertainty. This confusion is experienced as profoundly disturbing and opening up possibilities for extremist politics. One member described how teenagers vandalising his allotment reminded him of an increase in attacks on staff by psychiatric patients. Another reported social work students who exhibited immature, anti-authority behaviour. Another member thought that as parents we expect less responsibility from our children than in previous generations - 'we have to protect the little darlings' - but are furious when they behave irresponsibly.

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. The three hypotheses were linked by a strong sense of society being in a state of tumultuous change arising from changes in male/female relationships, competing belief systems and rapid technological developments, particularly in the field of human reproduction.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: *The Weakening of a Dominant Culture.* The loss of certainty and the resulting rise in levels of anxiety were analysed further. Society was characterised by 'difference, disorder, disappointment and dichotomy' and experienced as becoming increasingly diverse. The sense of fear about the future and fear of others - particularly Muslims, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants - recurred during the discussion. A fear of others' belief systems was identified as a cause of the virulent anti-asylum seeker sentiment in the country. This was associated in members' minds with a profound fear of powerlessness in the face of a potential surrender to other's control. The fear and anger associated with loss of control was being displaced onto easily identifiable groups who were not part of the majority culture. Fear of the future was at least partly located in a fear about changing gender roles. It seemed that medical science was developing alternatives to heterosexual procreation at an alarming rate, and there was a threat particularly to men, who could become unnecessary (castrated). At one point it was observed that there were strong male roles evident in the listening post group, as if reassurance might be needed that men were a necessary part of the discussion. The loss

of male potency and its links at a deeper level to castration anxiety, was a source of fear to both male and female members. One male member had talked about his lesbian daughter planning to have a child by IVF, and what that meant to his identity as a grandfather.

Hypothesis: We are living in an environment that threatens us with loss of control arising from living with increasing cultural diversity, and from rapid changes in reproductive medicine. The resulting loss of certainty about our cultural and gender identities has generated profound anxiety linked to fears of castration. Because this anxiety is evoked at a deep level, members of society feel overwhelmed, and this arouses paranoid - schizoid defensive behaviour. As a result, members of society have displaced their fear and rage, and projected it into identifiable groups such as immigrants, asylum seekers and Muslims, who become the bad object are then demonised.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Fear of Powerlessness. Members felt that globalisation has made us far more aware of the privileged position we enjoy compared to the majority of people in the world. Members' experience was of a pursuit of a hedonistic lifestyle that had been relatively unquestioned in the 1960's and 70's but which is now challenged by numerous global pressures - environmental degradation, terrorism, economic migration - and by more mundane realities such as ageing and childlessness. Members were conscious as a group of being white and middle class, and that we enjoyed our position at least partly at the expense of poorer countries and poorer sections of our own society. One member said of the Listening Post 'maybe we're just a bunch of white folks defending our positions'. There was an experience of real fear of loss of status and power as other countries begin to exert pressure for a more equitable distribution of power and wealth. Several members expressed guilt linked to whether they were able to look clearly at their privileged place in the world, and their reluctance to surrender it. A question arose at this time about whether the anxieties we were identifying were universal, and an inevitable part of being human. Could they really be identified as being specific to this time and for the reasons we were trying to identify? One member wondered whether we were deluding ourselves about how much human activity was contributing to global warming. We may be omnipotently projecting our destructive phantasies into our analysis of climate change. The alternative view put by another member was that we were in denial about climate change because it requires giving up some of our way of life. We became more aware of the tentative nature of the enterprise, but also that we were experiencing the uncertainty, guilt and dislocation we were attempting to identify and analyse. From this came the formulation, with considerable difficulty, of the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis: The current situation, in which we are no longer able to take our privileged place in the world for granted, is experienced by members of society as a profound threat to our way of life, and at a deeper level, to our sense of self. The future feels increasingly unpredictable, and the present is difficult to comprehend. Members of society respond to the complexity of these threats by attempts to withdraw from bewildering reality, as exemplified by retreat behind physical barriers of gated communities and strict border controls. These concrete external defences are manifestations of rigid internal defences associated with a fear of loss of a sense of self.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Ambivalent Leadership and Followership. The process of hypothesis formation itself was proving to be extremely difficult, with the expression of strong feelings in the group that the task was foreclosing thought by attempting to place definitive boundaries around highly complex and diffuse ideas. These anxieties were felt to be annihilating or catastrophic, and were linked to primitive fears of survival. The experience of members was that something similar was taking place in the wider society, where there was evidence of contradictory demands being placed on our leaders to take away these fears on our behalf.

Members of society were experienced as having abdicated responsibility for their own behaviour, as evidenced by members' experience of increasing anti-social behaviour, weak parenting and older people retiring early and trying to behave like younger people. They had forced political leaders, through projective identification, to take responsibility for them, but then attacked the politicians for being too authoritarian. Tony Blair was experienced by another member as at times attempting to control more and more of the decision-making process (for example forcing through the war on Iraq), and then suddenly abandoning decision-making by announcing a referendum. The image of 'sharks circling round Tony Blair' was described by one member, evoking images of intense oral rage, directed at leaders who were perceived as failing to meet dependency needs.

Hypothesis: Members of society are demonstrating increasingly anti-authority tendencies as a result of a wish to avoid taking responsibility for themselves. Adult responsibility is denied, split off and projected into our leaders. As a result, members of society have created leaders who are forced, through the mechanisms of projective identification, to carry our unwanted responsibilities. The consequence of this projective process is that collectively we are depleted, and pursue a hedonistic lifestyle in an attempt to fill the void. Leadership is exercised in concrete, non-reflective ways, which deny the complexity of social problems and threats, because we are collectively unwilling or unable to confront these realities for ourselves.

Convenor

Andrew Collie