

**"Britain and the World
at Spring 2009"
Report of a Listening Post held
in London on 22nd April**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post, participants were invited for the first hour to identify, contribute and explore their experiences in their various social roles (work, unemployment, retirement, religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary, 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:

1. *Transition – Crisis and Rapid Change*

The impact of recession and Baby P has given rise to increase of referrals of disturbed children to residential care over past six months. Paradox is that funding is now more secure in a recession (– but will it last?). Surplus can be used to improve amount of psychotherapy available to children. Children grow through their sense of belonging.

Belonging rings a bell. NHS is counting widgets to prove strategy and business plans, relying on outsourcing. Unit has to leave Salvation Army as host organisation – which gave a real sense of belonging – for an unknown future base. It feels as if we are running to stand still.

Organisations have to push boundaries forward to thrive. But healthcare in a competitive environment needs to demonstrate more than financial gain – ethically we are looking for something more.

I visit Salvation Army centres in 31 countries across Europe. A massive transition is taking place in the churches.

The recession has hit and you see real aggression. The police are trying to contain the aggression. The question is do we have the systems to contain the aggression or have we reached the limits of our ability to contain it? Can politicians contain it?

I am sure that the government is at its limit. They fear things falling apart and open revolt. Politicians are using the police – clear policy to keep Tibetan protestors out of sight of Chinese leaders during Blair's time, and now policy to kettle protestors in confined area making it impossible to protest. Keeping thousands of innocent people on the national DNA database is not in keeping with my understanding of British democracy.

People recently arrested on suspicion of terrorism in North of England have been released without charge. Policing of G20 is worrying. There is anxiety in government about control. Are ordinary police officers acting out on behalf of others?

Remember how the government historically sent in the troops at Peterloo – authorities trying to contain protest by violence. Sinister situation when police are being used today.

It is interesting that there is counter surveillance taking place with the public filming police behaviour.

I see the process of transition and change as being a preoccupation with what is ending but also as anticipating the new.

I don't see it as transition – more as flow.

I grew up in the 60's in a constraining background, a home from which I was desperate to escape. I enjoyed the good times – the music, the protest. My teenage daughter likes the 60's music as much as the current generation. I wonder about possible catastrophe. I know we had the bomb but we thought there was a way through. Is it different now?

2. *Macrocosm and Microcosm – Despair and Hope*

I feel impotent to change the big picture. So I concentrate on things I can affect. I am part of a Residents Association covering about 20 streets in South Manchester. Some people are well off. Others live in sheltered accommodation. Local traders have been supportive and in return we have been helping to revive the Traders Association. This has been very positive experience in a sea of chaos. I can listen to someone whose wife has died. An old lady was able to find a hairdresser through the association.

I spend time listening to staff in a hospital where people are living in a snake pit and feel brutalised. But in the small group there is real support available which is valued. I am puzzled by my over reaction to not having a response to an email. I worried that the lack of response was negative – but when the positive response came I realised that I had misjudged the fragility of the relationship.

I sort of ignore the bigger picture. I have a lot of government money for the next two years. I know those on permanent government contracts could be made redundant. I find it hard to allow other people's experience to impinge on me. Why don't I do something about it? Somehow it's possible to sail along.

I feel real helplessness and hopelessness at the sheer depth and breadth of the change. We could find ourselves using the Chinese currency instead of the dollar as the world's reserve currency, if Obama's programme does not succeed. China is where the wealth is. This will change the world.

Macro level is difficult. At the micro level things are more positive. My son is very despondent about the future, but I am proud of him that he is active in using his music against the BNP. My youngest brother suffered from the last recession. He has never really got back on track.

3. *The 'Haves' and the 'Have Nots' – Competition and Interdependence*

I had to turn off radio report on Budget when I heard some wealthy person complaining about the unfairness of the 50% tax rate for those earning £150,000. Burst of fury at City

brass neck. We are all supposed to be in this together but there are conflicting interests. Locally the community has been opposing a small group of developers who want to build luxury homes. Community idea is for allotments and garaging for car pool. 200 members of community are trying to raise enough money to buy the site. But the group has been taken over by a small group of well off people who show contempt for those who offer smaller sums of money. As a result people who have belonged for 10 years are dropping out.

I see people with very expensive cars and there is part of me which would like to damage them. People feel angry about inequality.

People have borrowed heavily to purchase cars or homes – status symbols which they cannot really afford. In Spain people do not flaunt their wealth. People who are rich will get around paying taxes. The least capable will be the ones who pay extra on their beer.

I worked in the health service but am humbled by the recognition that my salary then and pension now depend on the wealth creators in the manufacturing and other sectors. I worked hard but recognise my dependence on them.

But the other side to that is that people cannot create wealth without public services being provided. There is interdependence here.

For me the more sinister aspects are the re-emergence of the Real IRA and Continuity IRA in Northern Ireland. The recent deaths there are a perverse return to the negative experience of the 1960's. I saw a Sunday Times report on a change of strategy of the BNP – positioning themselves as the family friendly party – reminds me of the Nazi approach. Emergence of real hatred – use family connections for political gains. Report said their tactics, if followed by police, were to say: “Go back to your kennels”.

I have work in Poland at present where EU money is all over the place. But there are no real projects behind it – very sad. Ireland was in that position of having lots of EU money, but now they are in a worse mess than we are.

A friend told me how Warsaw has been rebuilt brick by brick. But it is soulless because there are no trees. If you recreate for the sake of it without real heart it is empty.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post, members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2 with a view to collectively identifying the underlying conscious and unconscious dynamics that might be predominant at the time, and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, 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 two interrelated hypotheses followed from a lively and stimulating discussion.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

There is a sense of the precarious nature of society and democracy which are under threat at times of rapid change. There are negative feelings associated with our sense of impotence at not being able to control what is happening. One outcome of this could be

that we retreat into a private realm cut off from the reality which is too painful. Religious fundamentalism for instance does not encourage thoughtful analysis but pushes a black and white interpretation of the world. The emergence of the BNP as a political threat, or the re-emergence of Continuity IRA violence in Northern Ireland indicates a similar retreat into intolerance.

We may project our negative feelings on to other people close at hand or further afield. We may be caught up in a sense of paranoia – if someone has not responded to your email for some time does that mean you are out of favour or have dropped off their email list completely?

Setting targets may be a way for the government to try to control their anxiety about what is happening in hospitals or schools. Clamping down on protestors may equally be a sign of government anxiety about losing control of public order. There is an anxiety that we allow dangerous people to occupy positions of power and authority. The police may be required to resort to tactics which undermine the democratic consent on which they maintain law and order. We worry about being totally dependent on politicians who do not know any more than we do what is coming.

Hypothesis:

Because of the social, political and economic changes occurring at this time members of society feel helpless and project their anxiety onto the Government which is not capable of providing the necessary containment. As a result members of society experience Government as aggressive and persecutory and in turn become aggressive themselves, threatening violence.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis

The precarious nature of the global experience can also be seen in the economic collapse and the potential environmental disaster facing us. This global phenomenon is new and at the macro level is unthinkable and inarticulate. However, change is an opportunity for a better future. The experience of working in local community associations to improve the quality of life is more positive and hopeful compared with the helplessness often felt about global problems. There is recognition that we are interdependent – that the health worker needs the wealth creator and vice versa. But there is also anger about inequalities of wealth and a desire for a more equitable society.

Are we able to begin to think about the structures that are needed to order such a global society? Are existing international agencies such as the United Nations, Churches or faith communities, and Trades Unions capable of developing a different kind of globalisation to that developed by market forces and transnational corporations?

The voices calling for a more equal society mean that we need to focus on leaders who exhibit integrity and are not solely concerned with material prosperity. To what extent are the Church and other religious institutions capable of containing our dependency needs during a period of rapid change? To what extent do we need ritual to deal with the experience of death and bereavement, for example? Muslim prayer five times a day and other relationships developed around faith communities can provide an important element of the social fabric.

Hypothesis

Because there is an awareness of the interdependence between different parts of society, we are now struggling to find ways of articulating our hope for a more equal and just society, with the result that the role of faith communities and other global institutions is being re-examined to see if they can provide alternative containers for our dependency needs.

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