

**"Britain and the World
at Spring 2010"
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on 21st 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

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1. The group was temporarily broken up in smaller sub-groups and subsequently these sub-groups later reported their identifiable topics to the original large group. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

1. Fragility and vulnerability of human beings and modern-day (Western) societies

The group seemed particularly preoccupied with the volcano eruption in Iceland and the havoc and disorganisation such an event caused to so many different countries around Europe. An event that felt far away but nevertheless affected the group members' everyday life. Furthermore it was noted that this was one of the first modern-day 'crises' that was not blamed on a particular individual, social, political or religious group (in comparison to terrorism, swine/bird flu, etc). The latter was associated with a feeling of helplessness and uncertainty as well as an expectation for someone to take care of the group members' welfare ("who is going to take care of us?"). Similar feelings and questions emerged in connection with the impending financial storm, a kind of natural event of its own which is now close to an 'apocalyptic' eruption. The group was left wondering on whether these phenomena belong to a wider transitional stage of human societies ("are we in the middle of something?") and how in the face of such experiences citizens remain so apathetic and passive.

2. Authority versus self-reliance and hope versus fear

The heated and vibrant discussion around the need for either stronger leadership or more active citizen (individual) involvement vividly illustrated the group's ambivalence around this and the strong feelings associated with it. The group was caught up in questions such as, 'is the expectation of stronger leadership going to reinforce a culture of hubris or one of increased responsibility and personal freedom?'; 'is it going to strengthen further "the small political elite [which is] running things" or give rise to a kind of 'micro-activism"; and, lastly, 'is it going to increase state control of our lives or provide "future care when we are old?"'

3. The experience of 'knowing and not-knowing'

In this case, the discussion revolved around the perceived collapse or need for change of familiar environments: political, financial and, to some degree, natural. The group repeatedly asked itself 'why are we pretending that we do not *know*?' Here not knowing was associated with themes like, a grossly unrepresentative political system, unreliable and self-serving media and individual responsibility in the lack of participation in social affairs. All of which are fairly self-evident phenomena that persistently denied, deliberately placing ourselves in a kind of a 'bubble' where knowledge is denied and eventually becomes distorted. A bubble that provides protection from realisations such as that: political talk is effectively meaningless (politicians), wealth is fragile and ephemeral and social cohesion can crumble down in a matter of a few hours (the latter most evident during natural disasters such as hurricane Katrina).

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. This part proved the most challenging and tiring for all group members. But all were committed in making their best effort, through an engaging discussion, to make sense of this experience. In this last part the group agreed on three main hypotheses that bear significant relation to each other:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis:

The impending National Elections in the UK gave rise to a range of emotions connected with a yearning for strong, decisive leadership alongside a need to experience one's self as unbounded by external agencies and structures, in effect, free. The realisation of this fundamental ambivalence brings to the fore the questioning of, what could be considered as, the fundamental pillars of social reality: what is the difference, if any, between democracy and exploitation, how is voting for a reality show and for elected (political) representatives any different, does the parliament have any potency, 'is it all a con?' At first, this kind of existential (social) reflection is a fertile ground for feelings of mistrust, scapegoating and suspicion. The culprits could be found everywhere: politicians, male domination and gross financial inequality, among others. Once such pent-up frustration is realised 'like a volcano', the desire for meaningful change and the construction of 'something new' soon becomes apparent.

Hypothesis:

The approaching change of political leadership in the UK after a considerable period of continuity presents an opportunity for reflection, and mourning even, for an outgoing leadership which although, at the outset, was invested with particularly high expectations by the end it felt as not having fulfilled its perceived potential. The imminent loss of, a once promising, leadership and its associated visions and promises are forcing members of society to painful self-questioning. The resulting anxiety from such activity is at times defended against by adopting polarising positions (e.g. stronger leaders vs. stronger citizens) and entrancing ourselves in them and their newly-found safety. This serves as to only perpetuate lack of change, frustration as well as feelings of disappointment and loss at each elective period now and, quite likely, in the future. In this state of mind, it proves increasingly difficult for new thinking and new ideas to be

formed and spoken. It remains to be seen if we are truly *'in the middle of something'* or we feel that we have just been placed there.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis

The combination of political transition and a highly volatile economic environment appeared to be in the centre of the group's preoccupations. The potential of economic and political instability is stirring up feelings of being unsupported, lacking old and tried boundaries and being faced with an unknown future which holds the potential for both imaginative and creative breakthroughs as well as for a 'generational Armageddon'. The uncertainty ('not knowing') of future political and social developments was compared with our clear knowledge of similar ills in the present time along with our inability to express such knowledge with conviction. The question was, 'why do we pretend that we don't know?' or, in other words, what purpose does this false certainty (fuelled by denial) serve? The need to create a falsely fail-secure and ultra-stable social, political and financial environment around us was associated with a couple of areas: the "fear of seeing how powerless the establishment [really] is" and realising the "fragility of the human condition". In that respect, the central question finally focused on "how [to] let go of the old without killing it?"

Hypothesis

The bombardment of the public with a constant flow of 'crises' (security, health, finance), particularly so in the last decade, in combination with a growing devaluation of old, trusted institutions such as, the political process and religious (moral) guidance are pressing upon us an increasing anticipation of impending radical change. This is a situation which gives rise to both feelings of hope as well as ones of fear. Hope in the 'arrival of something new' and fear of the potential for destructiveness in human societies. Historically such transitions have been associated with 'revolutionary' violence and the 'tearing down of the establishment' which, on reflection, has served as a defence against 'witnessing the dying process', mourning for it and, even more importantly, learning from it. But it now appears that society also has the ability and opportunity to display different types of resourcefulness and be 'as tough as old boots' without having to wear them.

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