

**"Britain and the World
at Spring 2011"
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on 13th April**



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 experiences 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. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following three interrelated themes:

- a) Painful, uncontained reality and self absorption
- b) Cut and prune the tree; uncertainty concerning who decides and outcomes
- c) Inspiration from the bravery of those facing enormous adversity

a). Painful uncontained reality and self absorption

I am retired from the health service now but you don't know what you get with this government until you pour it out. It may be a cynical view but Gaddafi overnight is changed from an ally to an enemy.

The world changed overnight. What has happened in the Arab world was unexpected and impossible to predict even for politicians. The education sector is in chaos waiting for a white paper.

Was there collusion between BP and our government and was I naive that I did not think our government corrupt?

Bhopal was an even worse example of environmental degradation and careless corporate response.

The Arab world is in turmoil. Action seems better than inaction, but do politicians have a plan or are they behaving like headless chickens?

What do you do in Libya? People have tried to learn from Iraq, but what would any government do? Nobody predicted the way it's unfolded. Japan has disturbed me not least because information has been released that does not stack up – the nuclear contamination threat now raised to category 7. Messages are being managed – but am I being fobbed off?

Spring has arrived after a very bleak period – trees in leaf – the seasons are constant even when everything else is inconsistent.

My big event is that my wife is due to give birth to our first baby soon and also I am starting up my own organisation. I feel very absorbed in my own world.

Your world becomes smaller when the external world is difficult.

People are concerned for their own survival.

I see the fight for survival in the commercial setting where I work. There is defensive behaviour, sharp practice when it comes to sharing ideas. I am very careful now about whom I share information with.

If you are under threat, who is going to protect you?

Defensiveness is a reaction to threat as a way of protecting yourself.

I thought that people would pull together under pressure, but they pulled apart. Once rivalry kicks in, progress becomes hard.

Containment is necessary for creativity. Otherwise it is chaotic. Where is the containment?

If you have a common enemy, a simple goal, you can make common cause – get rid of Gaddafi.

Obama was seen as the container, a godlike figure. But now we realise he is only human.

b). Cut and prune the tree, uncertainty concerning who decides and outcomes

There's a tension between keeping what's good and sweeping change. As a grandfather I went to see my grand daughter in the ballet Peter and the Wolf. In the original story the wolf died. In this version it survived. Recently I saved an apple tree from an old orchard, which no one else wanted to keep, by pruning it. Now it's blooming again. Let's nurture things rather than chop them down.

Where do you make appropriate cuts? My sister is bringing up her children on her own and is living on reduced income. She is angry when she sees others getting very much more.

Are we avoiding talking about what is going on in the NHS? This is the most awful time in this country; we have never seen it this bad. Talk about foreign affairs instead of facing our own problems.

I've experienced associate directors asking front line staff to accept lower status and at the same time work out improved systems of work.

Cuts haven't started yet. Everyone is in fear. Patient care is more controlled, even persecutory.

c). Inspiration from the bravery of those facing enormous adversity

How can I complain when others are in extreme positions – Japanese families displaced

and living on a gym floor? Life is tough but actually some people are extraordinarily brave, risking their lives. I am still alive and comparatively safe.

These seem to be exceptional circumstances – in economics and foreign affairs. The government is being brave to do things which will not get them re-elected; tackling the reform of the welfare state. Government has to provide some containment for the country to keep going. It's easy to snipe. But they are brave to keep us away from having cuts imposed from outside like Greece and Ireland.

I'm not sure that this way of managing our debt is not more dogmatic than pragmatic.

Surely dogma would mean they would pour money into police and military.

Do they actually know what they are doing? They are new to government. They do not understand the complexities of the NHS. Circumstances have changed and we are all confused about what to do.

It is difficult to put yourself in the shoes of those in government. I have just returned from Africa supporting medical teachers, who are working with very limited resources, I feel very fortunate among all these difficulties. Young people here are frightened by the prospect of unemployment and the cost of university education. But when we open our papers, we are also seeing that when people are suppressed it gets to the point where they cannot take it any longer.

I don't think I've ever been in that position of desperation.

Isn't it a matter of survival?

Young people will go by what their fathers and grandfathers tell them. It may be bravery or sheer determination not to put up with what previous generations have gone through.

I have drawn hope from those who have challenged the status quo; it's inspiring.

You remind me of a black director of an NHS Trust who was falsely accused and lost his job, even though he had been warned that this had happened before to black managers. He was brave to take on an impossible task in spite of warnings.

I agree about the inspiration but why do we not do it here? Are we too greedy?

People used to organise here. Now they are organising in Arab societies. People in London are still struggling with the impact on their families.

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.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Threats and Uncertainty

Analysis

Threats come from Mother Nature, terrorists, despots, economic upheaval and changes to the NHS. These are all threats to our well being. Changes from all over the world are seen as threatening. We are experiencing levels of anxiety on an unprecedented scale. If the threat is from an obvious enemy, people can pull together. But the experience is of not knowing who the enemy is. Our vulnerability is exposed. I realise that what I thought I knew does not apply. If you can identify an enemy as in Gaddafi it makes it easier to act. But if there is a general sense of malaise and you cannot find your place in it, then despair results instead of action. Who now is the 'they' we can blame? You cannot focus your anger. But this may mean that you express contempt for others. We have a sneaky admiration for those who are in clear trouble. At least they know where they stand. But there seems to be an increase in self destructive behaviour in Western society such as unprotected sex, excess eating and drinking.

Hypothesis

Because of unprecedented global, large scale change and upheaval which have no clear boundaries, members of society are finding it hard to locate the threat to personal identity and security. This results in a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Illusion and Reality

Analysis

Nature's order is to be disordered. We have imposed a sense of order which is not natural. We have enough sophistication to realise that the order we have imposed is illusory. We thought there were borders but they are not fixed or firm. Boundaries which were once seen as containing are now seen as unreal. Our internal objects are not always making sense any more. Our moral compass is adrift. The pilot of an aeroplane tells us we are crossing the boundary from France to England, but how does he know? We put politicians on a pedestal but they fell off. They are no longer the containers we once thought they were. America is no longer the super power we thought. The dollar is losing credibility as the world's reserve currency. We don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. Our ability to predict the course of events we now realise is very limited. Within this we know something new is emerging. In some ways we like there being many things to focus on. We are moving from the idealisation of heroes to the search for leaders. In Egypt leadership seemed to emerge from the crowd. But we may be in danger of idealising the revolutionaries when we do not know what they stand for. There is a realisation that resources are limited. Our death dealing instincts are challenged when we see the plight of others. But when we face reality, perhaps somewhat depressed, maybe we listen better. We may find ourselves better placed to take responsibility. Is there a notion that growth comes with pain – childbirth is not pain free?

Hypothesis

Because of the changes and uncertainties facing us, members of society are revising their preconceived ideas about the way they see the world and their expectations of the future. This may result in more realistic ways of taking responsibility for ourselves and others.

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