

**"Britain and the World
at Spring 2012"
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on 18th 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 relate 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. From the several themes that emerged, the following have been drawn together under four interrelated themes:

1. The Olympics – novelty and spectacle
2. Truth, morality and corruption
3. Social media: too little or more control?
4. The fit and disabled

1). The Olympics – novelty and spectacle

The subject of the Olympics was a unifying theme throughout this Listening Post, with several distinct dimensions. The notion of 'novelty' and 'spectacle' contained much of the discussion on the multiple dualities experienced by members as the Olympic events drew closer. On one level, the Olympics was supposed to be a celebration of sporting athleticism, with global communities coming together, competing and striving for excellence, whilst at the same time, providing an opportunity for regeneration of a disadvantaged part of the City, and a boost for the UK economy.

This was the 'surface' and 'public' level of the novelty and spectacle of the Olympics – the part that was 'out of sight'. But the words and actions that lay 'beneath' exposed a different experience. Some members spoke with anger, of feeling excluded from local decision making on arrangements for the Olympics, and manipulated by the media and government, as the preparations progressed. Some striking examples were given to illustrate the point. An advertisement seen on the underground, aimed at Londoners, encouraged 'us' to tidy up London before 'visitors' arrived for the Olympics, as if 'we' were cleaning up a flat before (and after) a party. The 'cleaning up' the streets extended to an official desire that almost became legal, to 'sweep away' the homeless who slept on the streets in order to keep things tidy. The economic and social hardship of the UK was felt to be denied and put to one side, whilst a shiny veneer of welcome and everyone being 'all in it together' was presented as the dominant reality. One member living in East London said "I don't know what people are talking about. It's not

my experience”. Another member told of receiving a text message, to his mobile phone, counting down the days to the start of the Olympics, and a sense of an approaching period of enforced “fun and fluffiness”. This demonstrated a feeling of people living parallel lives, disconnected and defined by power. The power to decide what stories to tell about London, and to determine the point of view communicated to a mass audience. This was countered by other members, who said that as a society, and as citizens, we have power to accept or reject the views in news stories, and that we do have a say. Some felt the ‘Occupy’ movement had added some value in this regard.

Ambivalent feelings were expressed about the world wide web, which both exposes us to the harsh reality of the world, and how it is, and gives us an opportunity to be more active than before, in both engaging in news stories and what is communicated. Some members observed that we are having to make adjustments to things that we were not exposed to before e.g. global 24 hour news stories.

In a similar way, the surface representation of the Olympics as a global athletic competition and sport, had a grimy underside that told a less worthy story of financial and corporate interests and greed, driving sponsorship deals and capitalising on the permitted use of the Olympics logo, and restricting the number of non-corporate tickets for the events made available to public citizens. Linked to this was the recent discovery of official records showing colonial atrocities, which seemed to confirm a feeling that things were not as they at first appeared, and could not be trusted.

There was an oblique reference to ‘hope that comes out of something quite dark’; a visit to the Olympics brought thoughts of death and life. Could you find joy knowing that you are going to die? Feelings of connection and splits.

Ransacking teenagers and the connection with the Romans – we should be more aware of atrocities, so that we can learn from history.

2). *Truth, morality and corruption*

The Olympics symbol provided a strong visual image for this part of the discussion. In the symbol of the five interconnected rings, could be seen the representation of ‘the one good gold ring of hope’, in an otherwise corrupt landscape. One member said ‘I feel I have to be here listening’, as if Truth and other higher ideals were in need of guardians for a safe passage back into Society. The five rings gave rise to a more poetic expression of aspirations and values, and reading books/poetry was more relevant than relying on the media for information and truth.

The media could not be trusted to tell the truth or conduct its affairs with integrity, and daily revelations from the Leveson Inquiry confirmed this by revealing new depths of corruption and seediness involving the Police and politicians. “I don’t buy it any more” as expressed by one member, summed up the anger, disbelief and disappointment with public figures who were seen as abusing their power and feeding propaganda to the public.

There was a feeling that we were sliding into a ‘hollowing out’ of the public sector, where we were ‘subcontractors’ to a corrupt corporate sector. The voluntary sector had gone from being ‘flavour of the month’ to being marginalised. The role and place of the voluntary sector in society is surfacing again, and the ‘deep conflicts in society’ are emerging, but is there any more coherence?

Evidence could be seen in the tax breaks afforded to those who gave to charity; altruism or self-interest? What ulterior purpose was served by ‘free’ newspapers – what were we being fed?

There was a climate of seediness and corruption in Britain as the Leveson Inquiry had revealed. Our political parties are funded and sponsored in various ways by special interest groups; should we be surprised at what it produced? Some members felt we should not be naive about this situation.

The ‘internal’ morality that should operate in society to regulate behaviour in the best interests of citizens appeared to have given way to more external forms of exercising control e.g. the riots last summer and the police response. One member suggested that it was difficult for us to act according to our conscience, and to do it with sufficient clarity for children to witness the exercise of a moral code.

The way the Police were being used to ‘keep things tidy’ was frightening. And it was felt that people who were in work, and those who were out of work had too much going on in their daily lives to be involved with each other.

Someone noted that in their work, there had been a ‘tearing apart’ of groups, but this was now levelling out, and there were signs of groups wanting to work together again. But what was to be done with this new willingness to collaborate? The member noted that she (and others) would have to make sacrifices – give up something, to enable the group to collaborate.

3). Social media: too little or more control?

Some members spoke of the many stories coming from the USA on the spread of AIDS, the coverage of the Brevic shootings, and the pervasive horror and violence of what could be found on the internet. One member told a story of a young woman whose boyfriend cut his throat in front of her whilst on Skype. Had we reached a point where some restrictions on social media and the Internet were necessary? The Internet had been liberating, making possible a plurality of views and connections, but it had also been a key enabler for paedophilia, making it possible for perpetrators to ‘groom’ their victims with ease. Members also spoke of the reliance on mobile devices and their potential to both connect people in a virtual world, and help them avoid contact in the real world e.g. the people who ‘retreat’ into their phones at parties, in meetings as a way of managing their anxiety of being in contact with others.

One member told of a recent weekend spent away from home, and her return to a ‘dead’ laptop. She had felt more alarmed than upset because she recognised her dependence on the laptop and the Internet. Work was ‘grim’ and she was aware of using the internet to get fun, and as a way of coping; there was guilt about this, but in some ways it was a similar experience to buying the ‘big’ Sunday paper, not reading it, and taking flight through reading only the Review section.

4). The fit and disabled

The organisation of the Olympic events into separate Olympic and Paralympics events had introduced the polarity of the ‘fit’ and the ‘disabled’. One member spoke of getting held up in traffic in a recent demonstration, where several people in wheelchairs were blocking the road. She had admired what they were able to achieve; a few people had brought traffic to a standstill, to draw attention to what they had to say; it prompted the reflection – when and how do we stop and listen?

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 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 shaped their actions towards them. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

The Olympics: corruption and the endangered city

Analysis

The 'shadow of terrorism' was something that was recognised as being present throughout the various discussions, but may have been too dangerous to articulate more explicitly. The Listening Post was taking place in a location only feet away from an earlier terrorist attack in Tavistock Square, and at an unconscious level, the fear that could not be spoken, instead surfaced in the violent incidents spoken of – the Brevik shootings in Norway, and spread of the mass communication of violence and abuse through the internet. The Olympics and the World Wide Web were both examples of things that were idealised as 'forces for good', yet both had been polluted and put to corrupt use. Members considered the ways in which the Olympics had come to 'carry' and attract much of the fears, anxieties and disillusionment that came from a more fragile social and economic order which resulted in more splits between groups, and difficulties in both reconciling the splits and maintaining a state of mind that was available to joining and collaborating with others, and open to joy and hope. Discussion about whether the city appeared to be preparing for 'occupation', 'invasion' or incursion' were thought of as representing an externalised fear of attack and displacement – a loss of home; a place of safety.

Hypothesis

Faced with the rapid changes in society and violent world events, members experience the world as an increasingly disturbing place where things are not as they at first appear, and can no longer be trusted. The result is that members retreat to their trusted places of safety and familiarity, and experience the Olympics as a 'spoiled' idealisation of nations competing with each other in a celebration of diversity. Instead of anticipating an experience of joy, and fun, the Olympics then comes to represent an external threat to a 'city in danger' from terrorists and corruption. Consequently, national identity is tested, and members feel ambivalent about the Olympics, oscillating between a competing desire to engage and join with others, and the desire to withdraw, and be separate. It then becomes difficult to hold an integrated emotional place in the 'city in the mind'.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

The Olympics: idealised beauty and the denial of pleasure

Analysis

Members discussed how they felt they 'ought' to be looking forward to the Olympics, and wondered how it might be possible to talk about the event in a positive way. This

seemed to resonate with the discussion that opened up the Listening Post, about the 'one good gold ring' in the Olympics logo, which could be seen to represent hope. Throughout the discussion there seemed to be an attempt to find a place in the mind for hope and goodness, and to keep it safe and protect it from polluting and corrupting influences. Members wondered whether, in expressing criticism and cynicism about the Olympics, we might be protecting ourselves from disillusionment and disappointment by denying ourselves the opportunity of any pleasure or enjoyment from the event. The separate Olympics and Paralympics event seemed to underline a juxtaposition between 'fit' and 'disabled' and 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' bodies. Members wondered what this meant for the city.

Hypothesis

Because of the way London is being mobilized for the Olympics, members of society express mixed emotions of hope and fear, anger and displacement. In a fragile social and political climate, members of society experience the Olympics as putting them in touch with the resources they feel they are being depleted of; youth, perfection, achievement and wealth. This results in a fear of being sick, ill and disabled, and the potential 'contagion' to the city as a consequence of 'invasion'. Members' anxieties are projected into the Olympics, and the associated fear is that the event will 'cripple the city' and lead to catastrophe. This leads members to complain and feel irritable about how their lives will be affected by the Olympic events, whilst at the same time, experiencing guilt about contemplating the possibility of the pleasure it may bring.

Convener: Mary Joyce