AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Britain and the World at Spring 2013
Report of a Listening Post held in London on 17th 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 presented, these have been drawn together under the following 3 interrelated themes:

1. The legacy of Mrs Thatcher: what power and authority did/ does she represent? — the iron fist or the velvet glove? Our search for leadership and the strong/ caring parent.

2. Who is really in charge? Who is running the show? Where is the power?

3. Can we protect the boundaries of social institutions (family, land, the NHS) against market invasion and impingement? Has goodwill been marketised and appropriated?

1). The legacy of Mrs Thatcher: what power and authority did/ does she represent? — the iron fist or the velvet glove? Our search for leadership and the strong/ caring parent.

The group acknowledged the funeral of Mrs Thatcher that took place in London today. Since her death there has been broad media coverage about her legacy, an 'accelerated unravelling' of what her legacy has left and meant to society over the last 30 years. This has ranged from idealisation of her time as prime minister, to the idea of her being a depriving mother — 'the wicked witch'. One member of society commented on how it had made her think about the unintended/unimagined consequences of decisions — how we judge the past in terms of the present.

Although the event it was not technically a state funeral, it had all the trappings of one. It was officially a 'funeral with military honours'. One member questioned was it the 'sentimentalisation of the military', or the 'militarisation of sentiment?'

The legacy of Thatcher in current society is still felt to be raw, simmering. She and her conservative legacy are 'not forgotten nor forgiven'. Members of the Listening Post discussed how there seems little societal reconciliation from those who feel she had overseen and delivered policies that denied the concept of society, and were also destructive of many communities. The media coverage has been intense. Even the magazine 'stylist' ran a piece on her legacy asking "how will history judge her?" Members talked of being sick of the coverage and debate about her legacy which remains deeply divided and split. Her style of leadership is either represented by 'haloes or horns', or 'saviour or destroyer'. Members felt there was no middle ground in this analysis, nor any analysis based on complexity.

Members felt that under the surface, there still lay deep resentment about her tenure in government, a communication which was still 'not heard', and that this now belonged to a disenfranchised level of society, who still remain 'the unheard.' Some members talked about a societal ambivalence towards her characterised by 'I don't know if I like her or not', or 'I don't want to be part of the funeral'. There had been no opportunity to engage in a public debate about opposition to the cost of the funeral. We are left with a similar ambivalence to her campaign to recapture the Falklands, the discourse still ranges between concern about the human and financial cost, to the idea that 'she made us great again'. The Falklands was not the first war fought for electioneering reasons. George Orwell describes the need for permanent war between Oceania and Eurasia in his novel '1984'. The arms industry requires the ongoing manufacture and use of weapons for its survival and growth.

It seems that within this discourse the idea of death and burial have become defined by cost, not by ritual value. In this sense members felt that part of the unresolved legacy is that everything now needs to be monetarised. There was strong condemnation and even a new policing policy against any form of protest at the funeral. As with the 'Occupy' movement there seems to have been a silencing of the concept of 'human value' so only the financial remains. Members asked do people now feel able to protest about anything? Protesters had to ask for permission to turn their back on the funeral procession. We should not need to police the right to protest, and there is no jurisdiction on disrespect. It has become very difficult to protest without being accused of being disrespectful.

Tourists in the Strand apparently spontaneously applauded at the passing of the funeral procession. Members asked were they applauding for her life or her death. Glenda Jackson also commented on the funeral, members felt her comments required some conviction. As a society we applaud conviction — a recent poll found that people now prefer conviction over judgement in their political leaders. It seems in this era that self-belief is more highly regarded than good judgment.

The funeral, like the 2012 Queen's Jubilee celebrations and the Olympics, seems to be filling a massive collective void. These events seem to represent a wish for 'common space' that isn't a shopping mall. They represent a way for us to feel connected with a common purpose. Members asked the question 'how do we find a way to mobilise our need to be together in a thoughtful and mature way?'

2). *Who is really in charge? Who is running the show? Where is the power?*

The legacy of Thatcher has resurrected repeating and conflicting mantras: 'this is animal farm' alongside 'you've got it wrong, she saved the economy'. The element of hero worship in the Thatcher legacy led to a discussion about the current accepted ideological position which is something like 'you can do anything you want as long as you have permission'.

A member of society from India commented that the current conservative ideology is similar to the British Raj where the policy was to subjugate the masses, to divide and rule.

This inevitable tension between collective ideals and monetarism gets played out, the right wing say to the left 'you nambies' the left say 'you selfish bastards'. We live with the consequence of this split, and the inability to reconcile it. These anxieties and tensions make us feel we are losing a sense of reality, Mrs Thatcher has created a legacy of the 'iron woman', always strong, and she cannot be allowed to be vulnerable even in the face of death.

This lack of reality is also played out across society through the illusion that the Government is in power. Members felt that in reality, power is in the hands of the multi-national corporations. The experience is that if Government is not in power and emotionally present, then the corporations are felt to be more distant and powerful. This feels to us like a sinister situation, a malignant power that is barely visible but highly influential, and operating just 'under the surface'.

A member talked of the recent Amnesty International arms treaty, she hoped but did not really believe that it could change the international weapons trade. We are increasingly suspicious of

where power and authority lie. It was felt that in current society the institutions are 'just pretending to be in power'. The world is getting smaller and we hope, but don't really believe, that we can change the influence of this new dynamic.

This falsity of power being held by government was revealed by the financial crash. We are left longing for a strong leader, even if it is a dictator, or a resurrected Mrs Thatcher.

3). [Can we protect the boundaries of social institutions (family, land, the NHS) against market invasion and impingement? Has goodwill been marketised and appropriated?](#)

Without a strong financial system there is a move to an alternative currency such as the 'bit coin'. In the absence of real financial authority we have created fantasy commodity bubbles. Similarly without real authority, institutions (such as the NHS) become under attack and people become immersed in 'on line' and 'virtual' engagement.

This creates a sense that the public can inform debates on a range of issues whether they be : clinical trials, public service spending, council highway strategies, in fact almost anything. This creates the fantasy that we are 'taking power' or being given power in the absence of real and effective power. This virtual engagement is not in 'real time' it is a fragmented diversion from reality and the nature of true relationships. The new localism act is a manifestation of this. A member talked about how his new neighbourhood group in Surrey is campaigning for 20 mph speed limits, and to pave over the high street. They feel that the ability to take and exercise power and authority is being handed down. But these are also felt as 'diversions and displacements'. We are fed 'bread and circus' to keep us compliant.

It is the well-resourced and articulate people such as those in Surrey who can act and seem to have power in the public domain, this leaves us asking 'what can I do, what can I really change?' A member talked of a large conference in the USA on the theme of 'doing good', it feels that 'doing good' has been marketised and appropriated. Society wills the end but not the means.

A member asked the question when did the government invite us to have a conversation about the privatisation of the NHS. There is little visibility and transparency about these dialogues. We only participate in them as consumers. Capitalism has a narrative and life of its own, this narrative glorifies the past and does not expect us to be in touch with vulnerability. Many of the new service industry jobs are now paid by the hour and with only temporary contracts, and the work is mundane and banal. Members expressed concern for the world of this work that their children are growing into, we wondered where this leaves their ideas of 'what is attainable?' 'what are their aspirations and hopes?' Our relationship to our families and caring institutions like the NHS have become imprisoned and claustrum like.

The group felt that a lot is aggregated into the concept of 'market forces'. A member asked whether the concept of market forces was infact fictitious. They are not really market forces, they are often simply manifestations of the controlling economic power of multi- national corporations. We are under the direct influence and pressure of these corporations. Examples of this economic control are especially evident in the utilities sector, for example the control of the price of gas and oil.

There is a myth of growth about the free market. In reality we cannot find the money so we water down the economy by making cuts to the welfare system. We make morally wrong choices which lack integrity and are rationalised by economics. For example this week we have cut disability benefits, the message is 'to keep people anxious and powerless', this in turn makes us feel powerless and dependent. A member talked of a colleague who works in the anti-slavery business, and criticises the common usage of the throwaway comment 'it's like modern day slavery'. He argues that statement denies the fact that across the world there is real slavery.

These 'conflicts of truth and reality' make us feel like we are caught in 'small prisons' or in an ideological mental trap. We are caught in a claustrum — a contradictory societal mind set. It makes

us ask 'what is my existential truth?' The new 24 hour technological culture also distorts our reality as it produces a roller coaster of fragmented emotions.

The Boston marathon bombing was mentioned, along with a commentator who has declared that we can become addicted to the news. News addiction is a symptom of our need to look for and expect uncertainty. This suggests that our environment is so unstable that we have to be constantly on the lookout, hyperaroused, and up to date with the news.

A question was raised by members; 'how does this culture influence our concept of family and the impact on our children?' A member commented on the case of Graham Ovendon the artist who was found to have abused children. In two major articles in the press his abuse was presented as 'it didnít matter/it was different in those days.' It feels that the press/society was looking to excuse him. Angelina Jolie has recently commented on her opposition to sexual violence and war, however she did not say that 'I am powerless to do anything about this'. As a statement from a famous woman who is beautiful and intelligent does it really have any real meaning, authority and conviction?

Members felt that the internet is causing children to become estranged from their families. For example Facebook has become a commercial tool, a 'perverse parent' that can observe our intimate relationships and in some cases encourages abuse. We desire to be known and be seen, but the parents are absent, there is no parenting just the market. The new technological parents are encouraging exhibitionism, this creates an invasion across boundaries — a sense of perverse spying on each other. We want the real parents to observe us, but they are too busy working in the new competitive markets. This causes us to feel neglected and we turn to facebook. We become like vulnerable children seeking out any perverse connection rather than protection.

Facebook is the new 'panopticon', but young people also use it as a sibling network to meet on the internet for discussion on issues such as support and bullying, there is also empowerment through the internet. Our persecutory experiences are of 'wicked witches, the arms trade and the digital age'. But the other side of the coin is that there is also a lot of creativity and passion involved in this engagement with new technology. In this alien environment we desire to locate some potential goodness but the generation gap is also accelerated. We are anxious about being corrupted and whether the internet will damage or facilitate relationships.

Mrs Thatcher represented the first woman PM, but she did little to support women's positions in the developing global countries. A member spoke of being on a train with a mother and young daughter, the member was writing on her laptop and the girl asked about the writing. The mother responded by saying to the girl 'she was at university'. Was this to encourage the girl to go for a university education? The Mum then said to the member 'you made a good decision'. It feels that the Thatcher legacy and the current financial crisis places more pressure on women about whether to have children or keep their place in an increasingly competitive market place. A member talked of how 400 women turned up to protest against the Delhi rape in Tavistock Square. There was a debate about safety in the UK and the idea that 'it doesnít happen here'. But it does. There is a denial of 'place and action'. In the current situation there seems to be no real dialogue, no shared reality, and hence narratives become disconnected. Members asked does the multiculturalism of London add to this complexity.

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 shape their actions towards them. The resulting analysis has been shaped into 2 interrelated hypotheses:

<u>Analysis and Hypothesis 1</u>

Analysis: Society longs for having the strong leader (parent) that can combine the male and female attributes of (compassionate) strength and nurture. The deep ambivalence and division created by the legacy of Mrs Thatcher has stopped us believing that this need for nurture will be met, and consequently we attack and denigrate the idea of the maternal. Our envious attack is a contemptive need, and the attack is on the possibility of generosity. In the face of current insecurity we feel strength is needed, and nurture and femininity is attacked.

The Thatcher era represents a historical watershed, a break with the post-war era, and the arrival of a new era of privatisation with an emphasis on consuming rather than creating. Pressure on women to go to work is felt as a 'perverse emancipation' an attack on the maternal care that we have been denied. If we can remain in the depressive position there is the possibility of finding and accepting nurture, but due to the insecure environment we remain in the paranoid position and want someone to fight for us. The more anxious we are, the more we look for the strong leader and go straight for the fighter. Thatcher is therefore reanimated now due to a weak coalition government.

Hypothesis: The legacy of Thatcher represents the end of the post war period (rationing) and real austerity. Thatcher permitted greed, a passion that was previously contained and unmet. Since the 1980's we have been permitted to feel that greed is good. In this new monetarist and competitive culture we have become like unattached children who 'don't know the parents mind' and are not contained by the parents, or like children of the parent who does not encourage and nurture the capacity to share. Without this containment — the security of being held in mind — we do not know how to share, or connect with others, and we remain greedy.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Although we desire to find alternative and authentic collective solutions to the current exploitative markets, the increasing marketization across all domains 'gets inside us'. The dairy farmers are exploited on price. The control of corporations like Tesco does not create a fair market, it is a monopoly and an exercise of power. (It was Tesco who broke the Sunday trading law). 'Fairtrade' is felt to be a genuine market where producers are paid for their labour, and to sustain the product.

Because the government does not regulate the corporations (nor the banks before the crash), they have power and a monopoly over us. This power and the illusion of abundance has created us as the 'good consumer', and we maintain this fantasy despite the fact that the financial collapse has evidenced that we cannot afford it. We continue to construct ourselves as consumers (financially) and therefore 'values' have become secondary. Social relationships have become transactional or via facebook, as has our relationship with the state which is now mediated by technology. This leads to extreme individualism. The 'active economy' becomes about ownership of iPads and mobile smart phones. This leads to dispersed power. The idea of 'not having' or 'not possessing' becomes intolerable, a covert but powerful social risk which we are not prepared to take.

Hypothesis: We become addicted to seeking satisfaction through consumer objects, but these cannot satisfy us. Public rituals such as the funeral of Mrs Thatcher, the Jubilee and the Olympics of 2012 allow us to re-engage with the social as a 'media event', but protest against these becomes either inauthentic or highly controlled. Our desires have been absorbed by the markets. As consumers we do not desire the idea of a collective society, because we are subtly influenced and seduced by the individualism that the new products offer. The 'consumer self' only imagines what he wants, and loses the capacity to be generous. Consequently we lose the experience of the nurturing and authorative parent. We project greed, and try to control this in each other.

Convener: John Diamond