AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

**Britain and the World
at Spring 2014**
**Report of a Listening Post
held in London on 16th April 2014**

Encouraging the Reflective Citizen

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Part 1: The sharing of preoccupations and experiences

In this part of the Listening Post, participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be they in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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 relates 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 themes that emerged, the following have been drawn together under two broad interrelated themes:

Theme 1: Change and complexity

In this theme members explored their experience of a changing and 'divided' Europe that was moving fast, and becoming more fragmented. The resulting splits held potential dangers; there were now marked differences between people in the EU (Greece, Spain, and Portugal) where some parts of Europe had youth unemployment levels of 70% and countries like Germany had very little. The situation in Ukraine was scary, and members wondered how, and if it were possible for (Europe) 'to come back together again?' In other EU countries, leaving the EU would be viewed as a sensible thing to do! It was thought that if a referendum was held in the UK to decide whether to remain in the EU or leave, the likely result would be a 'No' vote. What would happen if the UK left the EU?

In other places in social and public life, collaboration was emerging as a way of dealing with complexity e.g. crowd sourcing, peer support, etc - but not in Ukraine. One member said "We seem to have defined where the edge of Europe is - it's running straight through a country".

Why had Russia done what it had done? Was it because they saw a weak President of the USA? President Putin had jumped on an opportunity and seized it. What had happened was scary. People couldn't come together to provide help for Syria, and it opened the door for people to do whatever they wanted, and it couldn't be stopped. Obama wasn't about to do anything, and it seemed hard for the big world powers to come together.

None of the world governments seemed 'fit for purpose'. In the UK, UKIP would 'sweep the board' when it came to the EU elections, with serious consequences. It could be understood as a protest vote against government! We seemed to be in a party political situation with high levels of apathy in many parts of the world on the one hand, and on the other, a hierarchy of top-down political control in Ukraine; there was the illusion of choice, but in reality, no choice at all. It seemed that people were no longer able to get together and share their experiences and views around a political purpose - for example, when was the last time a good political demonstration had occurred in the UK or in France? People were feeling exploited by governments, and all around the world there were groups who felt they were not represented by a nation state e.g. Scotland. Apathy resulted and political identity through membership of political groups was not the clear choice it had been in the past e.g. being a member of the Socialist Party, and there seemed to be 'a fudge in the middle ground'

An alternative way of understanding these events emerged in the discussion and is covered in the next theme of 'hope or despair?'

Theme 2: Hope or despair? Good and bad objects and the changing dynamics of leadership

Members struggled with how they felt about these and other preoccupations. Throughout the discussion there was a divided view about whether events represented 'doom' or a 'ridiculously optimistic' perspective; in the middle of this continuum there was lots of potential and also fear. How could people engage with all that was happening? And at the same time, more reports were being published on the damaging effects of climate change and global warming, the diminishing world fish stock, and the constraints associated with an ageing population.

Set beside the world political events, local discussions at home were of house prices, and one member spoke of a dinner party where the disappearance of the recent Malaysian flight (and whether it was part of a conspiracy theory), had served as an ice-breaker. Another member wondered about the news coverage of those who had died in the South Korean ferry disaster, and by comparison, the number of UK deaths it would take to appear as a national news item. Geography determined how people got involved with an issue and the headline news. Real life events and disasters in all their horror could be known about with the immediacy of a 24 hour news media, and when it became too much, experienced at a distance through dinner games and stage plays dramatising these events.

People had paradoxical responses to technology and how it left them feeling connected and/or disconnected to the world. One member described 'feeling cooped up and cut off…staring at a screen… the day is spent having private conversations with myself…..' and another 'we're all stuck on our devices – networked, but really atomised'. People were in public, but they weren't present; 'they aren't there'. Another member spoke of the news coverage of Oscar Pistorious' appearance in the South African courts and how compelling it was – even exciting; the pleasure (and distaste) of being a voyeur.

An alternative view was voiced, largely by a group of women at the meeting. Technology could be viewed as providing a bit of visual staging – people were attached to their phones but they were connecting in new and different ways, which offered new, and other possibilities. Political campaigns to tackle social justice and inequality were using social media like Twitter to bring attention to issues and were having an impact e.g. 'Eve-teasing' in India, and the participation of women in the Afghan election. Instead of discounting social media and seeing it as cutting us off from each other, it offered the potential of making things possible, and posed the challenge of how to engage with it in an authentic way. Rather than seeing social networks as contributing to a fragmented identity, it could instead generate identity where one had not existed before. In places of conflict and struggle and in oppressed countries people were using these networks to communicate and engage with each other to good effect.

One member spoke of having taken to 'reading history compulsively' by way of getting an overview and being reminded of how things had 'progressed and evolved' in the past.   Was it a way of defending against a doom-laden reality, or evidence of a 'brave new world' placed at the end of a process, and moving to a more hopeful place of possibilities where an 'old order' was breaking apart?

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 hypothesis 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 hypothesis:

Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Change and complexity

This was a long discussion where it was difficult for members to find focus and agree on where to concentrate thoughts and how to make sense of the events and experiences shared at the event. It seemed there was so much change in the world that complexity of experience had increased, with the consequence of a fragmented foci and individualisation. This made it difficult to think about issues, and prevented people uniting behind a cause and mobilising themselves for political action; and if they did take action, it was in the form of a 'protest' against something, rather than in support of something. How could people join together? If there was no real leadership or purpose how could identity emerge? One member said he couldn't help thinking these were basic assumption leadership behaviours where the responsibility is put onto others to know the answers; politicians were very good at reading basic assumption desires/wants. All were detached from reality, and anxiety wasn't reduced.

The clear political identities of the past had blurred, and all that remained was 'a fudge in the middle ground'; the source of the fragmentation and the doorway to single issue politics as represented by UKIP. But was their success and that of a minority group in India who had

succeeded in getting legislation through Parliament, an exception or a transformative event and evidence of a groundswell of new political dynamics emerging for change? The discussion at the event appeared to reflect the hypothesis itself.

'Because of the complexity of the global environment, members of society find that efforts to make sense of what is occurring is nigh impossible and that there are almost as many points of focus as there are members of society, a result is that it becomes impossible for members of society to join in a united endeavour to make sense of their world and they thus remain fragmented and individualistic.'

Analysis and Hypothesis 2: Hope or despair? Good and bad objects and the changing dynamics of leadership

Some members at the event gave had a different way of making sense of the change and complexity members spoke about, and attributed the difference to gender and generational dynamics. The world was in change and that wasn't new, but different; was it scary or exciting? Within the continuum, there lay the possibility of creativity, innovation as expressions of new ways of forging identity, and connection. There was a need to hold onto hope lest it be washed away by despair. In the absence of political leadership, what do we do with our hopes (and fears), and how does this impact our actions? There was the difficulty of finding the 'good' object; the NHS was an example of a favourite object but it was difficult to deal with, as it was used as both good and bad e.g. nurses as angels/killers. One member spoke of her work in mental health services where they were as experienced as a 'frustrating object'; a news item that morning had carried a story about someone being 'turned away' from a health service 'as if we didn't care!' The waiting lists were everywhere, as was an insatiable demand for immediate attention; it was relentless.

Social media might be characterized as exacerbating our 'fragmented' and 'atomized' states as individuals, but it was also possible to find ways of engaging with what's happening in the world, and to feel interested, involved and hopeful enough. The speed of thought and action was happening so fast, and on a global scale, that it left a gap where conventional politics and ways of connecting lagged behind, with followership arriving ahead of leadership.

Because of global and social media, where members of society are bombarded with an overwhelming scale and pace of change, they view change as both a good and bad object, with the consequence of moving concurrently from hope to despair. The opportunity for instantaneous ways of connecting leads to members of society finding new ways to express followership, resulting in a leadership vacuum where thought followership seemingly develops arrives before its embodiment in a person, leader or political party.