

**"Britain and the World
Summer 2005"
Report of a Summer Listening Post
held in London**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants are invited to identify, contribute and explore their experience in their various social roles.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim is to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

a) Loss of the world as we know it

The speed of change has become a major issue for all members of society. Globalisation and the rapid development of new technology are changing the world and the social norms around us. This disconnect is increasingly evident between generations when knowledge and skills become rapidly out of date as a new generation of technology emerges. Communication technology as it develops is changing the nature of social relationships and the boundary between the personal and the public - notice how intimate conversations via the mobile phone take place in public places. The relationship between personal and public space has become more blurred. This constant loss of the familiar and the need to keep pace increases the 'generation gap'. This is leading to a breakdown of respect and a loss of belief in authority figures. There was some thought in the membership that this was leading to an increase in violence by young people. These were illustrated by examples of the lack of respect by young people and what was thought to be a decline in behaviour and lack of respect for authority. A participant gave the example of two young people on electric scooters shooting out in front of his car causing him to brake suddenly. When he remonstrated with them their behaviour was challenging and abusive. Another participant recounted a story in a local paper of a 16-year-old from Ireland who was badly assaulted and stabbed and suggested this indicated a more vulnerable and frightened country with a 'thinness of citizenship'. This lack of respect was highlighted and contrasted with an example from South Africa of 'false deference' where student behaviour was deferential to teachers, but it was ritualistic in character and covered something more challenging.

b) Political correctness has come to replace the struggle with difficult issues

A culture of political correctness around issues of diversity and difference has come to replace the struggle with difficult issues of creating a just and fair society. For example 'Care in the Community' as a term covers the closing of institutions and the real efforts to create a system of care for those more vulnerable members of society. When maybe it should be called 'neglect in the community' as there is an avoidance of the difficulties to provide care for those in need, and protection for the public from those who are a

potential risk. In public and political life the use of language to obscure meaning leads to an increasing cynicism about politicians and public figures that extol one position yet practice another. Such double standards have become a part of public life and are contributing to a political climate that leads to lack of debate and involvement.

The increasing emphasis on 'rights' personal, political, consumer, parental, citizens and human has led to a move away from the balancing concept of responsibility. Relativism has replaced community in the desire for justice. This is leading to a blame and compensation culture where the other (an individual, a group, the organisation, the government, and the local authority) is seen to deprive the individual of their rights to particular resources. Where has this focus on rights left the concept of responsibility? Responsibility to each other, to family, to community, to society and as citizens, we have become increasingly defined by organisations as consumers. Consumerism now increasingly drives our relationship to society and our place in it and this is impacting on areas such as parenting.

c) Unboundaried Children v Liberated Children

The problem of lack of respect and increasing violence of young people was thought to relate to a problem of failure in parenting. Parenting is becoming more difficult. The search for economic wealth is leading to a loss of confidence in parenting and economic poverty has been replaced by 'psychological poverty' and a lack of containment. There was felt to be a loss of confidence in parenting within society reflected in the number of television programmes about parenting. In some communities many children are left unboundaried and uncontained by parents who lack the skill and knowledge, because of their own upbringing, to provide an adequate psychological container for children's growth and development. Consumerism and the media have become substitutes for parental responsibility, toys, electronic games and DVDs have replaced parental interaction. However the participants acknowledged a split between a generation of young adults who were unboundaried and in conflict with society and a generation of young adults who were confident and able to take a productive place in society. These later young people were liberated from many of the conventions that had confined previous generations but were concerned for the wider community in which they lived.

d) Living with difference

The issues of exclusion and inclusion have become central to contemporary thought with politicians making demands for respect. But political correctness has come to replace the real struggles involved in the creation of a truly inclusive society. Despite the demand for inclusiveness many groups are marginalised - minority groups, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill and asylum seekers. Many groups become excluded from the 'moral community' their difference is seen as a threat to a sense of security and stability. The young have been recently demonised in the story of 'hoodies' being excluded from shopping centres, the increasing perception that the certain sections of young people are violent and aggressive.

e) Collective juggling of hope v hopelessness

The success of the Olympic bid and the Live 8 concert was thought to mark a sense of unity and global improvement. But the hope of the Olympics also has a downside: the cost to Londoners, compulsory purchase of land and property, disruption to the life of the city. Like the G8 summit, which is also marked contrasts: Debt v Trade, Aid v Economic Colonisation. These contrasts captured the experience of hope and cynicism, hope and hopelessness. A question was raised around 'Respect' and what is sometimes done on behalf of others. One participant raised the question of on whose behalf the

Live 8 took place. She reported there was no knowledge of the event in South Africa, which raises this question on whose behalf this event took place.

Hope becomes a defence against the hopelessness and destructiveness that threaten to engulf us. We wish to believe we can make a difference to the 'worlds problems' but there is also a fear of being engulfed by these problems that generates a helplessness in the face of global problems.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening post the participants are working with the information from Parts 1 & 2 with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious.

This analysis has been distilled into two interrelated hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Nature of change leads to a loss of respect

Analysis:

The participants reflected on the difficulty of holding on to good things - an optimism about the future. But there is also the loss of the world as we know it and imagine it to be. There is an inevitability of disappointment that leads to cynicism. A participant quoted an author who writing about the experience of a stroke in old age wrote 'I no longer have the hope that I can do it differently'. The talk of death, old age and change represents an underlying societal feeling of loss of the familiar world that we know. The speed of change is leading to an increasing alienation as traditional attachments and meanings become cast aside in the desire for the new. This creates an increasing cynicism, which leads to a loss of respect for others, and ourselves and a failure of faith/belief in authority, organisations and governments. The loss of containment of traditional institutions creates a sense of abandonment and an increasing emphasis on rights without the acknowledgement of the individuals and citizens responsibility.

Hypothesis:

Because members of society have difficulty with the speed and the nature of change there is a fear that we cannot manage the future. This leads to a loss of hope and the rise of cynicism, which results in a loss of respect for others and ourselves.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

The envy of youth as a fear of survival

Analysis:

The speed of change, particularly of technology is impacting on what we hold as important. Young children are now able to use technology in a way that older adults wonder at. In a wider context work has been changed by the advent of new technologies and this is leading to a collapsing of generations in that skills and knowledge have limited time spans as new technologies emerge. Technologies have also become abrasive

and intrusive. The boundary between public and private has also become blurred as these technologies allow constant contact. Young people have become the focus for societal projections. Youth have been demonised as threatening and aggressive or idealised as holding the hope for the future. Increasingly society is using youth to define itself. There is cult of youth apparent in the use of cosmetic surgery and the attempts to try and maintain a youthful appearance. This represents the envy of youth. Yet this contrasts with a seeming disregard for life and the preciousness of it in the way we deal with suffering and death on a global scale. This envy is an avoidance of the process of decay and loss and grieving that are also part of the lifecycle.

Society fears that as we grow older we cannot 'hack' the future and this leads to anger at youth and an enviousness of the younger generation, and a problem of communication between the generations. An older generation find difficulty in finding a place in a fast changing society where they can no longer expect respect for their age and knowledge. Technology that has become intrusive also generates a lack of respect as we encroach on the space/boundaries of others with music and telephones calls.

Hypothesis:

Because members of society are faced with the increasing speed of technological change which is leading to a valuing of certain types of knowledge and information the generation gap is increasingly apparent. This has generated a culture of youth and longevity that is a defence against death and mortality.