

**"Britain and the World
Summer 2006"**
Report of a Listening Post
held in Birmingham
on 6th July



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 experience in their various social roles, be these 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 'social' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

An all female group of 7 met the day before the anniversary of the London bombing on 7.7 05. It was also the week of the World Cup finals. The venue was a Quaker Meeting House where in the next room an amateur dramatic group was rehearsing songs and whose presence became increasingly apparent through the course of the evening.

Themes centred on a preoccupation with the increasing influence of consumerism and the unstoppable opening up of the global market place. Associated pre-occupations were with the pace of change and the increasing complexity associated with it, expressed through concerns about failed leadership together with a search for a different type of leadership which enabled more healthy relating. These took the thinking forward to understanding what was being reflected in the wider society. Themes were sifted to form the following three inter-related statements:

a) Enslavement to Consumerism - Control under the illusion of choice

There was much preoccupation with shopping and consumerism. One member spoke of her experience of shopping on Sunday in a large department store and how unpredictable she found the responses of the sales women to her. Some appeared to treat her like 'Mrs Nice Customer' and some as 'Mrs Horrid Customer'. This was experienced by her as unsettling and bewildering as if an instantaneous judgement is made over the briefest of exchanges which makes one question or trust one's own identity and judgement. "Who am I for these people? What else have I done to make people react in this way". Casual interactions can be so variable and somehow disconnecting. There was bemusement as to why.

A member had talked with somebody who had escaped from Africa to UK for a better life but hates it here. Does consumerism make you happy, what are we working for? "It's scary".

Another member thought there had been an erosion of values with people now working on Sunday and having to give up leisure time. There was relief that the Sunday Shopping laws were not being extended (for now!). On the other hand prices are coming down, you can get t - shirts in M+S for a 'fiver'. We are seduced into buying lots of 'stuff'. " I love shopping but then come back home and feel sick and it is meaningless. Maybe it's because we are hunters and gatherers, we are hard wired to consume". The group seemed in two minds about this.

In contrast another voice said "Am I a complete freak in that I go to a place of worship on a Sunday"? (This Quaker venue) The difficulty of not working is that you would conclude that the only thing left was shopping. Her experience of going to an M+S café was that it was full of retired couples and women meeting women, "the army of beige". This member wanted to flee from that reality saying if that's what awaits me I don't want it.

It looks like there is choice but really there is not and we are enslaved. City Centres lack cultural aspirations. "I'm enraged and we've allowed it to happen. We didn't notice that the people with the big voices were making millions of money. There's a tyranny in it". Somebody had gone to a concert at the Symphony Hall and you weren't allowed to cough, then somebody coughed in the interval and there was a row. Even in cultural places there is control rather than culture. When did it change?

Lots of references made to the 'sixties' and the good times then, although one member remembered it as essentially a mindless time of sex and drugs. However, today people are more compliant, you've got to do as you are told. People are frightened. You've got to keep your head down, your mouth shut and keep quiet.

b) Withdrawal from an increasingly complex and constantly changing world

The session started when one member said they were preoccupied with work. "I want to withdraw from the world". Her experience working with the mental health of staff members of various organisations was that the level of stress was going through the roof. She described a sense of helplessness with an inability of people to even notice what was happening to each other let alone help one another. She has noticed an increase, generally, in defensive behaviour as well as bullying with people being 'all over the place'. This was puzzling and difficult to account for.

Later this topic was returned to and an observation made that staff are not given the resources to do the job in the required time leading to exhaustion. Lots of people say they feel depressed but really they are describing extreme exhaustion. There was a stark contrast between those who had no job and those who were trying to do 2 jobs at the same time.

Another younger member working temporarily with children with 'special needs' was struck by the incredible turn over of staff. From the outside there is the appearance of calm but the reality is that there is a lot of stress and a sense of inadequate resources to support staff let alone children.

The person who had gone shopping on Sunday had done so because they had gone to a conference on Saturday which she was supposed to go to on Friday but which she was too tired to attend. She was frightened that if she went she wouldn't be safe driving down the motorway.

This led to another association from someone else about how preoccupied society is with safety. She had heard when in the pub about a local project for schools whereby children were bussed some distance to a rural market town to learn to recognise 'stranger danger'. Local volunteers pretended to be paedophiles in the woods and children had to say 'no' to them when they offered sweets. Many of them could not say no. Are we endangering our planet or manufacturing fear? Nowadays children aren't allowed to go out, everything has to be controlled. It is hard to breathe and find a way out of that.

There was resistance to thinking about the anniversary of 7/7 bombings - we don't want to revisit the experience of a year ago. Will this be an opportunity for another act to terrify me? Somebody remembered the Birmingham bombings in the seventies - recalled her fear of being Irish, the media whipping up fear, the enemy within. It is important to remember so we can learn but there is also fear of thinking, facing reality.

c) The search for mature dependence - The tension between the individual and the group

Another member noticed in her job in the mental health field that there was a lot of emphasis on 'wellbeing' and 'happiness' which clients were searching for but who were left disappointed and isolated after they had finished therapy as there were inadequate resources for long term support. David Cameron seemed to be jumping on the bandwagon stressing the need for independence rather than dependence as if the latter was unhealthy or unmanageable. It was difficult to develop 'healthy dependence' and a number of contributions were then made regarding an increasingly ageing population. The older one gets the more aware one is of our need for others. Who will be around to look after me? How do we reconnect with each other and get back to the pre Thatcher years and away from the current ethos of every man/woman for them selves?

A couple of members were looking forward to winding down, withdrawing from the familiar routine and reaching out to new experiences which would entail engaging in a different kind of way and being able to enjoy personal space.

There was reference to the Diana Ross song coming from the next room and a yearning for those inspiring times which seemed so different and vital but which were lost for ever. A sense of disillusion of having to face an increasingly complex reality as if 'wading in treacle'. In the sixties and seventies everything was being explored, society was more political and there was the capacity to change things and disagree. Something has been lost in the will to work collectively - it is there still but can't get going. There is 'grey power' though - a lot more of that about.

A wish was expressed for space to worship - finding a place where I fit. Although one member had lived near here for 10 years she had never got around to coming to the Meeting House - probably too busy shopping! It is so hard to get off the treadmill. You have to cram so much in at weekends. But another member said that worship is not a remedy. It is difficult and demanding (Abba song loudly in the background). You have to rely on your fellow Quakers at those times to carry you through. Another person was put off when a potential friend said she was religious and the member withdrew from getting close because of a suspicion of established religion. "It can become divisive". There is a resistance to 'groupishness' now and risk losing one's individuality. How to keep the ideas and values without creating divisions. People want a sense of identity but it turns into fear and control. There was admiration when a 63 year old colleague challenged somebody in the street in a quiet way.

What went out of the window in the 70s - the discipline? But being a disciple is difficult. It is OK to have 'self' discipline but scary to have it imposed. People want to belong to groups - but then there are in - groups and out - groups. It happens at school in the playground, it happens between schools of psychotherapy. How do we think about our part in slavery without becoming enslaved?

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively trying to identify the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at this time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the participants 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. This analysis has been distilled into the following hypotheses.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Ambivalence towards Leadership

Analysis:

The anniversary of the London Bombings was barely alluded to and the question of leadership was generally avoided too as it was made into a more peripheral issue. This was demonstrated at one point in Part 3 as the convenor was challenged by the requirement to come up with one of many potential 'truths' as if there was concern about having a strongly held position or the possibility of coming to a conclusion and in particular there seemed to be a need to dilute differences. The implicit challenge then being - would facing conflict and our differences lead to war. (A few weeks after this event Israel invaded Lebanon). One possibility was that we are enslaved by politicians and collude with this so as to avoid having to think about the bigger picture. People don't want to think because it is too painful. The group thought we want leaders to be human and vulnerable but the model of leadership we are familiar with no longer seems to be working to contain us and leaves us floundering. Tony Blair was seen as on his way out and no longer 'holding' the nation. There appeared a need to escape and resist thinking about a fearful world populated with disaster into one of nostalgia for the past (stimulated by the music from next door) to a bygone era where people could make a difference and be heard. The observation was of a society which increasingly perceives all the control as being out there and external with no sense of internal controls. This was linked to lack of discipline and self - discipline and there never appearing to be enough time - people experience fragmentation, a sense of disconnection.

Hypothesis:

In the face of the seismic shifts globally members of society increasingly feel helpless and fearful, expressed in ambivalence towards what is seen as a failed leadership and a failing system where nothing seems to work and we don't know what to do. This leads to impotence and a belief that we are unable to think - at the same time this avoids the painful reality involved in facing a changing world that we all need to adapt to.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Complexity

Analysis:

Members of the LP see the world as changing exponentially and boundaries between what is inside and outside no longer clear cut. This stirs up primitive anxieties about 'survival' and influences our relatedness to each other and who we can trust. We cope by either withdrawing from reality and cutting off from each other or we externalise our anxieties and they get fragmented, split off and disowned (as in hypothesis 1). In this way it was suggested that fears about our own self destructiveness are put into the suicide bombers and it is the predatory paedophiles who represent the dangers of closeness and our lack of control. Shopping becomes seductive and a soothing opiate - perhaps an attempt to join up our common humanity in the global market - but ultimately leaves us feeling impoverished, empty and lacking the resources to cope. It is as if we are driven relentlessly in a manic, unthinking way by fear of the unknown - a system that is bigger than all of us which we can't comprehend or control. Someone at this point said "We are all in a huge mechanised ant hill factory".

(Interestingly this blurring of boundaries became concretised at this point of the evening as the noise from the singing group next door became more and more present in the LP. Initially this was greeted with ambivalence, firstly as distraction and intrusion but increasingly as a reminder about what was going on out there where it seemed all the energy and vitality was. This enabled the group to cut off from the difficult experience of being in the here and now but at the same time reminded us of our wish for creativity, certainty and commonality which seemed illusive and out there but which we still aspired to).

Hypothesis:

People's minds are overwhelmed by anxiety as a result of world events and so by disowning our fears and putting them out there, we don't then need to know about or have to face an increasingly complex and confusing society.

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