"Britain and the World at Summer 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 13th June
from 7:00pm to 9:30pm
at Connaught Hall
University of London
Tavistock Square
London WC1E 7HZ

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, share and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of political, religious, 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 everyday life' that relating to the external world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Several themes were identified by the members and these have been distilled into three major themes as below.

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Theme 1: Something Missing
The session opened with discussion around George Bush's 'missing watch'. It continued with references to the missing girl Madeleine McCann. The McCann's story prompted a member to share her experience of being involved in a toddler going missing in a busy street. She remembered the mother of the child 'wailing from the bottom of her soul' and this caused such anxiety in her that she identified the wrong child in her urgency to relieve the mother's stress. She then suffered feelings of guilt in causing the women even more stress. Another member related a reported abduction at the London Aquarium and how the security guards had given a tip to observe the child's shoes as the abductors would find these more difficult to change than clothing.

These events prompted the question as to why so much attention was being given to this one child. And whether there was a 'hierarchy of despair' as many children were going missing and hundreds dying in Africa. Another member made the link in terms of there now being no memory of harmony and identity for a lot of people although he could remember living in harmony in a multi cultural community in Malaysia as a child and having a strong understanding of his own identity. He stated 'by having to be all things to all men you lose your identity'.

Theme 2: Suspicion and Mistrust
E-mails were circulating that the parents of Madeleine McCann were being investigated by the police regarding their possible involvement in her disappearance. It seemed that although their efforts to personally keep alive the hunt for their daughter on a worldwide scale the honeymoon with the Press may be over and they may have gone from being heroes to being under suspicion - having feet of clay. There seemed to be uncertainty about whether we should criticise the parents or the police.

There was suspicion of the Security Services having knowledge of the terrorist bombers prior to 7/7. The suspicion was that the available intelligence had not been acted on and there was fear that this resulted in the terrorist attack. What were we not being told; there appeared to be another world that we know nothing about.

Ken Livingstone once regarded as the voice for oppressed and disadvantaged people now seems to be more interested in supporting an American on contract who appeared to be less than ethical. Why weren't we publicly asking who stands up for the disadvantaged?

BONO and Bob Geldof had previously been held up to be role models and put on a pedestal since the G8 conference. However, after they were critical of the outcomes there has appeared to be an attempt by the establishment to ridicule and silence them The difficulty of speaking out was also exemplified in the difficulty of politicians speaking about immigration, as was the case with Ruth Kelly who stated publicly that we were promoting the formation of ghettos by not helping people to speak English.

Theme 3: Globalisation and Democracy
There was a question raised as to whether globalisation has been approved by National politicians: With a follow up question 'can parliament approve something that is beyond its control?' The affect of Globalisation was to create permeable boundaries yet the public were never ever informed of this as a policy.

Fear was expressed about the unlimited access of labour from across the world, and the large influx of people from Eastern Europe into Britain, over which there appeared to be little control. There was a view that in years gone by people coming to this country were genuinely seeking asylum and were warmly welcomed by all. However, the current work or economic migrants are a very different group who are having a considerable impact on communities.

One member explained that the title of the Listening Post 'Britain and the World' at Summer of 2007' had caused him to think about the distance between Britain and the world and question whether Britain is in or of or beyond the world. Do we still see it as superior to the rest of the world in post colonial terms? Or if the title had been reversed to the World and Britain does that mean that Britain would have to punch above our weight to maintain dominance. With the permeability of boundaries are we losing our identity? He said it felt as if we were drawing in our breath and waiting to know whether Britain would be included or excluded.
Another member stated that there was no 'Global' democracy just big business making decisions based on financial considerations and not taking into account the impact on humanity. 'There is anxiety in everything we see and hear and we ask 'what is the truth?' People need to reclaim democracy.'

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

n this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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 following hypotheses were those that emerged in the Listening post.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: The Missing Future
The discussion in Part 1 about missing or abducted children and the loss of societal memory in relation to living together in harmony prompted the question of 'What is really missing?' If we are so pre-occupied with 'something missing' what is going on for us internally? It was suggested that what was missing was security or an inner trusted framework for making sense of our world. As things are, members of society are unable to test reality or confirm their identity with anyone and this leaves us hopeless and helpless. It was felt that this led to a sense that public and private boundaries were no longer recognisable. Safe places had been penetrated which was shown in the reference to 'something as sacred as a child had been stolen'. Members of society have lost their internal reference points. We are left waiting for the development of a new global culture that will provide the trusted framework. A way of dealing with this is splitting so that everything has to be right or wrong, good or evil, and this can be seen in programmes such as Big Brother or the media response in to the McCann's; from heroes to villains. There was an idea that what had gone missing was our future (children being our future) and therefore it was impossible to be responsible for something not known.

Hypothesis:
Because of permeable boundaries the culture as we knew it has been destroyed and there is a strong sense that something is 'missing' or lost, that members of society are in a no mans land, with no rules or trusted framework that we can rely on for our points of reference, consistency, continuity and confirmation. A result is that members of society are experiencing feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and impotence; and to splitting whereby everything is seen to be good or bad, right or wrong. This leads to a search for the familiar and to identification to 'known' groups which may lead to polarisation and conflict.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: Loss of Identity, Uncertainty and Impotence
Faced with the experience arising from Hypothesis 1 members of society are all feeling disadvantaged. And there seems to be a clear identification with those who have no voice in society. It seems that there were many important things occurring but that members of society are unable to talk about them. It was as though there was a collusive process by 'those in the know' that blocked any attempt to question the big issues. An example was the cost of the Olympics which was dealt with by an uncomfortable Minister in Parliament, amid opposition criticism and subsequent media

criticism. However, since that time there has been little if any further comment and no attempt to challenge this overspend. It's as though members of society, including politicians and the media cannot say important things because they fear being scapegoated. In discussing the issues of suspicion and mistrust there was a feeling that we are unprotected, and constantly questioning what goes on behind closed doors. What did the Security Services know about the terrorists who took part in the bombings? How could members of society speak about these issues openly and honestly, saying ' the difficult things', especially when the were many examples of people in positions of authority like Ruth Kelly, or high profile people like Bono and Bob Geldoff who, when doing the 'straight talking', were undermined, ignored or vilified. It was as if the whole process was fraught with danger; and one member mentioned that he felt uneasy about saying what he really thought about the terrorist issue and later about migrant workers. There was mention of a tension between the perceived 'establishment' and members of society being able to influence. There was a concern that the move to a global togetherness would create a territory without an outside enemy which would lead to the creation of an enemy within the boundary.

Hypothesis:
Because of the loss of our individual and group identity members of society including political and other societal leaders are left with uncertainties and insecurity around what is right and wrong and what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. This leads to a sense that you can't say anything important for fear that you will be pilloried, destroyed or even annihilated. A result is that we are all made impotent and many important issues are simply not challenged.