"Britain and the World at Summer 2008"

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 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 relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

1. Erosion of civil liberties

The vote by MP's, extending police powers to detain suspects on terrorist charges for 42 days without charge, was a concern to which the discussion kept returning. There was anger that this decision was about political advantage or the survival of the government rather than a decision of principle. It had been surrounded by the spectacle of bribery and inducements. Members closely linked it to related concerns about the extending use of surveillance powers which following on from 9-11 are now being used by local authorities and the health service to stop everyday anti-social behaviour. A question posed was whether this new legislation will eventually be turned against us all? One member pointed out that South Africa had had a 90 day detention which had not 'worked' and that labelling people as terrorists would merely bring up a defence and increase our risk and fear by transferring the problem 'to the streets'. Another pointed out how the government mantra 'tough on crime and the causes of crime' had notably failed to address the latter.

Criticism of the way one immigrant community failed to encourage its members to learn English and still relied on translators, was balanced by a comment that this group were also refugees and asylum seekers who had experienced terror. The point was made that a greater danger lies in our fears driving out the connection of civil liberties with attitudes which once made Britain a more welcoming place to a previous generation of refugees. One member commented that the pervasive language of terror may also be a calculated way of diverting political attention away from issues like child poverty or the inability of politicians to control very much.

2. *A collapse of will?*

The punitive tone of the recent announcement about the closure of 'failing schools' prompted a general concern that this was the wrong approach and was creating a problem of sustaining morale. One member commented on the disappearance of the 'will' to study in young people in their neighbourhood. This was felt to be in sharp contrast to their experience in Spain. In reflecting on the differences in the benefit systems of the two states, it was suggested that in the UK the emphasis was very much focussed around meeting housing needs whereas you would wait for 2 years for a counselling appointment which would then last for a mere 6 weeks. It was also thought that government/ social policy makers think in terms of 'sticking plasters' rather than addressing more fundamental means to mobilise people to think reflectively about their own solutions. As one member put it 'taking inner responsibility away from people and externalising it merely plays to raw fears'. There was an acute sense of social policy engendering a passive dependency and impotency.

3. *Democracy and is anyone in control?*

The credit crunch, collapse of the housing market, and now steep rises in oil and food prices prompted one member to ask 'why did globilisation come?' But the reference to 'our' industries losing out raised a contrary view — that nationalism now had little to do with our deregulated, transnational form of capitalism. It prompted questions like 'is anyone in control?' It was felt that there was considerable 'confusion' in society as to why things were happening and 'who' to blame was also unclear.

Power was felt to be draining away from government and there was a sense of concern about 'where is democracy?' A sense of not being heard or represented and therefore of political impotence was strongly felt with comments such as "I can't do anything" and "If I protest what do our MP's do?" In contrast to this it was pointed out that in Spain everyone complains. In the UK there was little active engagement in politics or trust in politicians to represent our interests although the presence of political activism was still a sustaining experience for some. It was pointed out that although small in scale, ongoing demonstrations against Iraq were still taking place etc. But this sense of agency and active enrolment in civil society was in sharp contrast to the more general experience of passivity, a sense of impotence and hopelessness along with a corruption of language.

One member suggested that if the recession deepens a re-discovery of anger and new forms of collective action might re-emerge and the dangers inherent in the present political vacuum were noted. It was felt that people are seeking out institutional 'pillars' to contain their societal anxiety about the future. But it is the pull of 'weak' forms such as an unreal celebrity culture or authoritarian forms of religion and politics to which people are drawn. It was noted that the BNP had successfully stepped into this vacuum in several northern cities by identifying with a sense of abandonment felt by a mainly white working class in these de-industrialised areas. Small gestures like sending birthday cards to elderly

constituents together with demonising other ethnic groups had resulted in the BNP taking a significant number of seats in one city. In contrast major public investment to improve the material surroundings had achieved little political resonance.

In terms of more positive experiences of difference, one member saw the UK as having an amazing union of parliaments in which the concept of 'union' had been broadly seen as a 'good thing'. This generative, if sometimes uncomfortable relationship was an evolving balancing act of interests which was now under pressure as competition and envy rather than living with difference were promoted for political ends.

4. *Annihilating the role of relationship*
One member mentioned their organisation had put in a 'big computer system' which was now 'down'. This seemed to highlight how the importance or value attached to the role of human nature receives much less attention than that now invested in the role of computer systems and IT more generally. A relational focus is largely ignored or downgraded in favour of attention to the latter and this finds expression in for example the tick box culture, the desire for polyclinics over community based GP practice, and the pull towards a surveillance society mediated by these new technologies. Yet, as one member pointed out, all fundamental problem solving involves interdependence and self esteem: envy and desire are ever present shapers of organisational and societal behaviour. In a micro illustration of this the two mid session sub groups in the LP re-constituted themselves drawing all the men into an almost all male sub group and creating as a consequence an all women subgroup. This patterning triggered comment about a competition for members.

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 might be predominant at the time, and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, 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.

<u>Analysis and Hypothesis 1</u>

Analysis
Many societal and economic changes are impacting on us: 9-11, the 'war on terror', the aftermath of the Iraq War and its occupation; the phantasy that house prices would continue to rise has collapsed and more recently the impact of the sharp rise in food and oil prices. These have all challenged and confused people. While small numbers in society do continue to be politically active and engaged, a sense of passivity, impotence, avoidance and willed ignorance in understanding these changes seems to dominate. This has allowed draconian surveillance

measures to be introduced by government and legislation which erodes civil liberties to be passed. Ostensibly this is to facilitate 'the fight against terror', but the same legislation is now being used to address all manner of day to day anti social behaviours. A further consequence raised was a collapse of 'will' to learn identified amongst some young people. Converting society's fear of terror into actual street violence may be another consequence.

Hypothesis
Because of multiple and sequential societal changes during the past two decades of economic liberalisation and globilisation, a majority of people now feel their voice is not 'heard' and have become passively dependent on others to 'do something'. Together with the primary corruption of language and media misinformation this has resulted in an extension of draconian powers of surveillance and the erosion of civil liberties operating under the guise of fighting terrorism.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis
People are looking for institutional pillars to hold them together and to provide a sense of identity, power and agency. Key institutions either no longer exist or are all over the place and contradictory. People are unsure what the right thing to do is, or what to do to be safe. In the absence of containment by traditional institutions, people are drawn to 'weak pillars' like the celebrity culture or reality shows which provide a seductive alternative and a palliative.

Hypothesis
Because the institutional 'pillars' in our society are failing to contain the anxieties unleashed by the current crisis of finance capital, people are confused and fearful that 'no-one is in control'. This results in an experience of chaos and fragmentation in which power has become identified with material wealth.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis
A vacuum exists arising from the absence of authentic political debate which is being filled by alternatives. The recent electoral success of the BNP and the growing attraction and vitality of more authoritarian forms of religious practice across all major faiths, points to a deep shift in society. Many people do not feel secure and bounded as once collective risk is transferred to the individual. Yet the contribution of relational ways of thinking to understanding all of this, even in many caring roles, has also been sidelined especially by the role of information technologies. This results in a lack of depth in social policies towards addressing the real and irrational social anxieties which are all around us.

Hypothesis
Because our political culture suppresses conflict of political ideas and appropriate in-depth debate, social policy thinking is often reduced to superficial 'sticking plasters'. While these may appeal to those who are better off and afraid of losing their material gains, the punitive tone of many changes takes away dignity from those who are on benefits or disadvantaged. It creates suffering and envy and a

hatred of signs of dependency in society which is resulting in feelings of hopelessness and a turn towards the certainties of fundamentalist, authoritarian forms of religion and politics.

Convener: Ursula Murray