

## "Britain and the World at Summer 2011"

Report of a Listening Post  
held in London in June



### 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. The following four interrelated themes were:

##### *1. Cradle to the grave*

Currently not a good place to be at either ends. Closure of sheltered housing in a locality where there is a 30% growth in the elderly. Lot of fear about the lack of safety nets around care. Southern Cross debacle. We just carry on covering up. Focus on individuality leads to ignoring the top and the bottom of society. We also desperately want to come together but how? Search for community/ massing together such as the street parties over the Royal wedding – some experiences empty but some pleasant. A concern that masses can give permission for terrible things to happen was countered by a 'not us – on our island'?

##### *2. Media as displacement activity*

Are we peddling off the cliff. Does the focus on extremes in the media allow us to ignore the vulnerable in front of us. We are addicted to extremes as long as we don't have to do anything about it. Media is about making money and 'stories' are what sells copy like sensational murders etc. although some journalism is still worthwhile. "Mandatory safeguarding is bollocks" we are not playing our part in accountability. The Japanese earthquake hadn't been mentioned in our discussion indicating there is little processing. Do we allow ourselves to think and stay in touch or reflect on events? In a reference back to Part 1 of the exposures in recent TV programmes of both the terrible hidden levels of child poverty in the UK (added to by the powerful image of family living in a waterlogged beach hut near Clacton) and the Panorama revelations of a 'stunning' level of abuse of disabled young people in a privately run hospital – someone pointed out if such revelations get inside you and one can tolerate it, then one can act to bring about change. But as a society this is largely not happening – so where is it all going?

Is our constant use/referral to mass media how people cope with it? But it is still largely gossip that fuels media usage/sells stories – for all the advancement in technology. What are the outcomes of Twitter and other new media was the subject of

different opinions. Does the new media enable change or in the end is it just a fragmented displacement activity? Some strongly believed it does generate a sense of power and increased capacity to make choices. There were other concerns eg is that blogger real or not. . .

### 3. Dependency v autonomy

What are 'they'/ government going to do about is the common refrain. In relation to care it was asked why don't we take responsibility for 'our own'? Can we ever go back to a situation where families look after their own? The state and levels of public service provision it was also pointed out is an expression of how we choose to cope as a society with dependency – it mirrors our level of concern. But older, shared collective certainties are being corroded. Mention was made as a grand parent caring for babies and care of an elderly parent was occurring. It is women who largely do this caring. This fact has not been acknowledged in the rhetoric around the need for a 'big society'. Caring for grand children has become a new norm because of the prohibitive cost of child care (mention of £1000 p month for full time care). The reality is also that women have increasingly withdrawn from the once assumed role of care for elderly parents as they have taken up new roles in the workplace. Would men step up was a question posed?

### 4. Splitting

Splitting was noted in the way the discussion had gone: highlighting care v retreat; old v young; passive v active; individual v society. It was noted how personal anecdote had been present in the chat before the session started but on becoming a reflective citizen at 7pm it had immediately changed the flow to a more political discourse and generated more heat.

## **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.

### Analysis and Hypothesis 1

#### ***Absence of thinking***

**Analysis:** There were a number of strands in the discussion which in different ways emphasised the absence of a capacity to think and process events as a society. Because of an inability to share we don't test reality. Anecdotes become reality. Our inability as a society to take in the terrible evidence of child poverty in the UK, the inability of staff in the care home (featured in the Panorama programme) or to recognise and stop the embedding of abuse is indicative of an inability to reflect and to engage in processing destructive emotional experiences or critical thought. The fast pace of the 24 hour media and its addiction to emotional extremes can (if not always) encourage a transitory awareness. Our attention is quickly diverted by other information about some new concern – so 'issues' quickly blow over.

**Hypothesis:** Because of our inability 'to take in' emotional experiences and process them, (indicated by the general absence of group supervision for care home staff or interest in LP style reflection by citizens) as a society we come to feel less and therefore act with more callousness to those who are vulnerable. This results in an unconscious awareness of what this will mean for our own older selves in the future.

## Analysis and Hypothesis 2

### *The impact of gender*

**Analysis:** Fear was expressed around the demographic shift of an ageing population – with for example in one locality a 30% growth of the elderly taking place alongside closure of sheltered homes. As a culture we prize individuality and ignore dependency. We choose not to think clearly about the consequences of an ageing population. This raised different questions and differences of viewpoints. Do we prefer to be dependent rather than take action?; do we need as a society to revalue caring rather than outsourcing it?; do we need a welfare society as well as a welfare state? Can 'we can go back to situation where families look after their own?' Is cutting back on welfare support as a consequence of the financial crisis, in some sense a good thing in itself?

Another perspective emphasised that we are talking about women. Women already provide large quantities of unrecognised and unpaid 'big society' style caring in families for both babies/ children and elderly parents. But in general women have indicated that unpaid care of the elderly at home can no longer be an assumed role in society. Women have benefitted from what a welfare state can enable in the way of socialised care albeit not of a higher enough standard. Shifting more care of the elderly and children back again into the private sphere of the family raises the issues of whether this is possible. Women are not prepared to do unpaid care work to the same degree as in previous generations. It also raises the question of if and how men will take on these caring roles as they are still generally an absent presence.

**Hypothesis:** Because of the financial crisis and a society adverse to higher taxation, socialised care in various forms is being curtailed and there are increasing pressures to return greater provision of care of the young and elderly to the home – with by implication women mainly taking up this gap in care provision. As women in society are also experiencing the highly gendered wider impact of policies promoting a 'smaller state' around welfare benefit cuts, this is resulting in a reduction of autonomy for women and a growing, if as yet unspoken anger as to how they balance care and other roles in society.

**Convener:** Ursula Murray