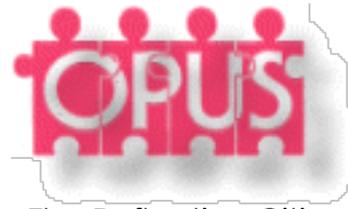


AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Switzerland and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



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.

Uncertainty, chaos, change and fragility. Safety, protection and cautiousness. These words were expressed both verbally and in attitudes at the start of 2015 in the Swiss Listening Post. News of the Charlie Hebdo attack in neighbouring France shook many, especially in the French speaking part of the country. It was experienced as an attack on European society and values, which raised concerns about whether Switzerland would be safe sparking outraged and self-protective responses. This raised discussion about the rising conservatism in the country signalled by anti-foreigner sentiment. Unsettling questions of a new form of narrow-mindedness were difficult to entertain for a country traditionally considered a safe haven. Cited as a symbol of how Switzerland can integrate difference, is Imam of Bern, who was voted as Swiss of the year personality for his work on cohabitation of communities. He is vocal about the need to build a shared future between Christians and Muslims based on agreed frameworks and better integration of the practice of religion in line with the values of Switzerland and the rule of law. This kind of dialogue is seen as rare but highly sought after in a world in which the threats of violence and coercion are increasing.

Although a day after the official meeting, news of the unpegging of the Swiss franc from the Euro were deeply unsettling to many people reinforcing the idea that Switzerland is drawing its borders more narrowly without consideration of the consequences. Hailed by some as a form of national protection, of independent action to and a way of standing up to external agents like the European Central Bank, many saw the unpegging of the Swiss franc as potentially disastrous to the Swiss economy with export prices raised immediately by 20%. These polarised reactions similar to the polarised reactions to immigration are indicative of a small country wrestling to find its place in a changing

world of big regions and big issues.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following four interrelated themes:

Closing Borders –Feelings to keep Switzerland for those living in the country were prevalent. Votes to limit EU immigration questioned Switzerland's role as a reliable part of Europe and seemed to reinforce its separation. Following the previous vote about minarets, this vote was seen as confirmation that Switzerland is shutting itself off from Europe and the problems perceived there. However, the public votes on these issues indicate an increasing tension within the country between liberal and conservative opinions.

The Plight of Humanity – stories of the difficulty of being human were very prevalent; whether it be stories of immigrants trying to settle into the country, the tragic story of a Mother killing her two children when told they would be taken into care or stories of the difficulties of local shops facing closure in the face of insurmountable competition from the internet. A theme of being preoccupied with the fragility of being human, of forging a life surrounded by menacing and faceless threats was a major theme, representing the uncertainty and fears that people are wrestling with.

Division – between traditional ways and modern technology, young and old, rich and poor, well-educated and poorly educated, cities and countryside, cantons of the different linguistic groups were heavily emphasised. Underlying these divisions were split feelings of pride and shame, progress and stagnation and tolerance and narrow-mindedness.

Part 3: Analysis and Hypotheses

The following two hypotheses are offered drawing on the pre-occupations and themes outlined above.

Hypothesis 1 - The Invasiveness of Fear

Analysis: Acts of terror in the world and threat of violence on domestic or societal level are experienced as frightening – both the reality of the images that stream across the media and the reality of difficulties at home. Combined with natural disasters, changing weather patterns and increasing instability in the workplace, there is a strong sense that predictability and safety are becoming increasingly rare. These world issues are linked in people's minds with a breakdown of discussion and dialogue. Communication is seen to be increasingly inflammatory – with requests framed as demands and demands framed as threats,

leading to a feeling that discussion is increasingly futile, leaving many in a depressive state of powerlessness.

Hypothesis: The feeling of powerlessness at home, in the workplace and in society leaves people demoralised and withdrawing from situations perceived as difficult. Yet because there has to be an outlet for these negative, destructive feelings, people increasingly project their negativity onto other people, parts of society or foreign bodies (people, countries or religions) in order to gain some respite from the fear that is so psychologically invasive.

Hypothesis 2 Can Hope prevail?

Analysis: Small acts of friendship, of kindness, of generosity were shared – symbols of people trying in their own ways to make the world a little better. People shared examples including volunteering for charities and helping those in need. Initially shy to talk about these small acts, considering them to be inadequate in the face of such complex and overwhelming fears, as people talked there was an increasing sense of potency as they realised some of the ways in which they create meaning and comfort for themselves and others. Against a rising feeling of the divisions mentioned above, these small acts of kindness were taken as beacons of hope – reminders of the humanity rather than the brutality of people. This was especially important when set against the backdrop of large institutions that wield power at organisational, political and societal levels, that can render individuals impotent to take action.

Hypothesis: When threatened by the uncertainty of the world and the disillusionment in large-scale systems, there is a mental struggle between self-protection and despondency and hope and reaching out. Some of the split opinions in the press indicate a polarised society, yet there is a sense that individual citizens are trying to wrestle with these polarities and hold both in mind. Sometimes they are held fleetingly, yet if the polarities can be seen for what they represent – different perspectives on the challenges of society, it is hypothesised that they can be reflected upon and this in itself is hopeful because at least then issues are visible and perhaps negotiable, even if they are difficult and divisive.

The two hypotheses offered this year indicate a split. It is as if we are awaiting to see which side will win – fear, self-protection and projection, leading to further divisions and difficulties in society or hope and consideration of people and issues leading to finding new ways for peoples to co-exist.

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