AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

**United Kingdom and the World at Spring 2016
Report of a Listening Post
held in London on April 20th 2016**

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

PART 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles; be they 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

PART 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES.

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

Theme 1: The EU debate; we cannot make sense of things as there are no real facts, no one knows what to do including our leaders.

A member of society raised the issue of the forthcoming EU referendum. Currently there is no sense of political leadership. The Tories are split between Cameron/Osborne and Gove/ Johnson, there is vitriol from both parties, which has damaged any sense of trusting relationships. Consequently we have no sense of 'what is our (political) parents stance on the issue'.

In the 'Brexit' camp the EU is constructed as 'the enemy without'. Members acknowledged it is difficult to have an informed view on such macro –economics. For many people being for or against is about an intuitive judgement rather than a factual analysis. The economic and social arguments are conflicting, members of society wondered which of these issues will resolve the decision. Immigration is central to the debate, but the blame for the problem of immigration has been 'dumped' by us on Turkey and Greece, both of which are poor countries.

Forecasts of new immigrants suggest 100,000 or more are expected. The complex impact on UK social infrastructure; schools, housing and hospitals was acknowledged. A member of society spoke of not being able to connect immigration with the Referendum. Gove is saying by remaining in we look like idiots, but there is no substance to his or other

arguments and we find ourselves at the mercy of the political orators. A member of society mentioned homelessness in London, (and that 'the Big Issue' is a great read). For her the question of refugees is very difficult, but London doesn't seem to want to get to grips with the homelessness that is literally on its doorstep, and this feels like hypocrisy.

A member connected with the idea of 'where are the parents' and commented that in her view the EU social/economic issue was similar to the difference between a 'service industry' and a 'market economy'.

George Osborne has been commodifying Brexit, saying it will cost every family £4K per annum. Members felt we are governed by the corporations. The people who create money, the bankers, were meant to serve society, but they have had a greedy affair with money, and there is no real financial governance. The Panama off shore tax avoidance crisis has made this greed transparent, it evidences that the corporations are not creating wealth for the people. Neoliberalism was meant to create wealth via the 'trickle- down theory', but now it is exposed as corrupt and we can see there is no moral underpinning to this ideology. As a result of this the poor and homeless have become a real irritation. It now feels that all the people who can't contribute to the market economy are a liability. Even schools now have to construct themselves as businesses through the academy route. A member of society spoke of this being driven by our sense of loss of place in the world, we are no longer an empire – and no longer the 'Great' Britain. Member of society asked themselves which way will we be more powerful in the EU as part of the bloc, or in 'splendid isolation' and trading globally ? Members felt that a significant part of the debate is about which is the more powerful position.

The more Cameron says 'do this', the more people oppose him. This also is why Trump is so popular in the U.S. he fills the space for those angry with and marginalised from mainstream politics. The Maastricht Treaty is still an influence; the 'remain camp' are essentially pre Maastricht – concerned about the risk of being out of the market, the post Maastricht camp is more about social belonging and sovereignty/democracy.

Theme 2: Children (and our adult infantile selves) feel at the losing end of the failure of human relationships, and the dominance of monetary values.

A member of society mentioned the two recent high profile murders committed by teenagers. Members asked is this the rage of failed dependency? Another member commented on the inadequacy of mental health services, having recently experienced the suicide of a youngster whilst in hospital.

Members of society discussed this as a reflection of the failure of human relationships and the dominance of monetary values, but they acknowledged that they also felt apathetic. There is evidence from global Listening Posts that nobody knows what to do. We are approaching the end of globalisation and in 2016 people are feeling helpless and hopeless, and the politicians are not meeting need. Hence we experience the rise of extreme politics, and extreme groups are empowered e.g. ISIS are supported by a number of Arab states. The established parties don't know where to go. A member commented that Obama has seemingly done very little over the last few years to influence stable international politics, another commented that we can't expect Obama to be a wizard. Some groups are resisting the increasing marketisation, and we desperately need alternatives. People have got tired of the current order and need to look for another way.

However, members felt that there are ways to empower ourselves: A member who is the Chair of a community land trust spoke of an innovative scheme they were developing to make housing affordable, by linking the prices of new homes to local incomes. Developers were selling the equivalent for up to four times more. In this way, he felt that if civil society can be mobilised and organised, common sense can prevail and we can influence the government. His organisation recently achieved the reunification of small children from Calais with their families, by taking the Government to court. We can't sit back and be consumers. There is a schizophrenic social discourse – Donald Trump taps into such anger, but can we tap into anger creatively ? How do we know which elements of civil society or 'the social' we can use to bring about change?

A member spoke of how the constitution is working in South Africa and holding the government to account. Members asked if in the UK are the courts the nearest we get to a constitution? We need to get past the mirage that we can't do anything by applying pressure to create change.

A member of society remembered her childhood in a French village during the German occupation of France. The German officers were very kind and spoke of missing their families, but the RAF was bombing them, and civilians were killed, so it raised the issue of who were the 'baddies' and who the 'goodies'. There is the argument for unity in Europe to ensure that war doesn't happen again. It is not a time to break apart, but to create greater unity, members felt we are therefore more powerful if we stay in.

A member spoke of attending a Quaker meeting where there is a polite conservatism from the older generation, not wanting to upset too much. They were campaigning against the renewal of the Trident

missile system, and chose to collectively write to MPs, and post the letters in one envelope. Their belief is that 100 letters is better than 1. His view was to take personal authority and send 100 letters. It raised the issue of how do we take our own personal authority ? Do we follow the collective or remain individual - in or out of the EU ? Do we reignite the jingoistic idea as 'splendid isolation' or should we now collectively identify that we are European. The politicians don't seem to know what to do apart from offering money to solve problems.

Theme 3: incredible change largely driven by technology

Members of society spoke of the influence of technology. Some are optimistic about the use of technology to create change e.g. a recent 'TED' talk spoke of drones that could take the internet to remote communities, and more importantly the recent leaking of papers electronically to the press which made the Panamanian off shore scandal public and transparent. This action means that investment banking will never be the same again, so change is happening. Members of society felt that on the 'down side' there was a manic belief in technology, people believe that 'if only it can be technological and rational then problems would disappear'. We are being busy 'doing stuff', but there is huge social inertia. As long as we feel we are doing something, then we do not have to face our collective responsibilities.

The new Virtual Reality goggles are another form of escapism. Virtual Reality cuts people off from reality, but the other side of the coin is in using VR headsets for surgery training, technology being used for good in the real world. The media is full of stories about the next ten years, and the prediction of robots in every home. Apparently Cambridge University have a robot receptionist.

Members of society asked can we really replace human work with robots? In this basic assumption 'me' culture, people are wearing mobile technology such as a wristwatch that counts heart- beats. Recently a high court judge commented that because people are using social media to record their own sexual exploits, it is disrupting court judgements and the legal process. People act and think as though they are in a virtual world. The boundaries between what is real and illusion are becoming increasingly blurred.

PART 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the 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 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.

Hypothesis 1: The EU and the role of boundaries: We do not know if we are separated or joined, and have become split and confused between the two. This is played out in the EU debate between federal law and sovereign law, and the decision to 'stay in' or 'Brexit.

Analysis.

In the debate about the EU, we are really asking 'where are we safer'? Splendid isolation is a yearning for the lost empire, our colonial days and 'gunboat diplomacy'. Brexit implies the sea will protect us as we are an island nation. The fantasy of absolute boundary control reduces the risk from immigrant peoples 'who are not us'. In our anxious borderline state good and bad become confused or interchangeable, and we risk remaining in the paranoid schizoid position.

Members of society asked; How can we stay in the depressive position in order to hold ambivalence and identify good and bad within our own system ?

This hypothesis also includes the hope for strong boundary management, e.g. the fantasy that Europe is a safe place; but recent events such as the refugee crisis and terror attacks in Paris and Brussels have shown us that recently it isn't. Our desire is then to make boundaries better and stronger, and not be lax about them. The sense is that lax has been abused or overlooked by the EU, and that we haven't held a vital boundary.

A member commented that we fail to see the views of the refugees who see in Britain something that we don't see ourselves. They are risking their lives to come here, and yet to us they represent a danger. Members asked 'How do we reassert safe social boundaries within the EU economic system', how do we re-assert 'moral life'. In the UK we have our own internal struggles e.g. with affordable housing. The markets feel mad and bad, and we desperately need sanity to be brought back in, and that a moral basis to the markets can be re-established.

Members of society asked 'What is it that the refugees see? ' Is it something historic and cultural that we have lost sight of? They feel the UK offers safety, but we can't acknowledge that this vision could be nurturing, and that we have always relied on immigrants to create wealth. They also bring new skills and resilience, the NHS is reliant on immigrants. We seek security through a denial of diversity. Seeking

security is also a search for identity, but we cannot risk the cultural imbalance that we feel may arrive through increased immigration. 'They' could come from anywhere? and in Germany Angela Merkel opened the door to immigration, and is now paying the price. If we extend this anxiety the logical conclusion is 'to keep safe Brexit will need to become a more global phenomena'.

Hypothesis 2: A rage is developing around 'failed dependency', this creates feelings of powerlessness we do not feel nurtured.

Analysis.

This hypothesis links to theme 1 'not knowing what to do'. Members of society reflected on a hypothesis around rage - most of us are very angry about the way current society does not nurture us. This state of mind can lead to the rise of extreme and concrete politics exemplified by Donald Trump, or it can make us look for a creative alternatives.

But people expect to be dependent on societal leaders, who are themselves feeling powerless. This creates inertia, a lack of power and feelings of social immobility. Members asked why do we need nurture from leaders ? where is our interdependence ? The dependency culture is failing. Britain after WW2 developed a leadership which gave us a structured welfare state, council housing and the NHS. This integrative social policy was a bit like an enactment of the African saying 'it takes a whole village to raise a child' . But these structures are now seen as too expensive and consequently they are felt to be disintegrating. The market economy has now recreated a new 'undeserving poor'. In the Netherlands they have accepted that they can no longer afford a welfare state.

The imbalance of rage and powerlessness makes people apathetic. We get desperately angry and this is amplified when the personal reflection mirrors the rage and powerlessness at the global level. We are now part of an enormous community, but we don't know how to take responsibility for the extremes e.g. radical Islam. We project our anger out and into these groups and 'those' murderous children, and thus enable them to grow and spread.

A female member of society commented that when someone with a moral voice speaks out it makes us feel better, so why can't we all own a moral stance? She felt that some of the things that we regard as unthinkable e.g. class, and how this is constructed into a notion of 'winners and losers', are written from a male perspective. Women's struggle with the sheer graft of keeping families alive is not recognised, rage and power as the dominant discourse are too masculine.

Members discussed if we do not own our stoicism, powerlessness, inertia and cynicism, are we withdrawing authority from those in power? Apathy is subtly dangerous - is enables the ratio of losers to winners, debtors to creditors to grow, and enables us to stop feeling part of belonging.

If our despair gets too great, can we expect to be rescued from ourselves? We might instead fall back on the fantasy of being rescued by robots or drones. When this happens we really have put the VR goggles on.

Convenor: John Diamond