

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Germany (Berlin) and the World at the Dawn of 2016 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 are invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part is concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that relates to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants. Participants are invited to share their preoccupations and experiences as citizens of Australia, and to explore these from their various social roles, be these in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities.

Twelve people took part in the listening post, more women than men and more elder than younger people. The difference in age covered almost three generations. Members reported about experiences in their different roles in society.

Topics discussed include the distrust of the media; disappointments towards politics; friends, who disappointed with their intolerant, xenophobic views; horror of violence; concerns about the changing environment; but also gratification that protection and security can be offered to foreigners.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Participants discussed different topics, which can be summarized into three rubrics.

1. Escalation and polarization leads to helplessness

Participants expressed their views that things develop slowly but unmistakably apart. It was discussed about the possibility that processes tip over and rationality as well as cohesion disrupt. The attempt of individuals to overcome disruption fails.

The escalation occurs both in the inner and in the outer world. It was

mentioned that attitudes of friends and acquaintances radicalize. They become xenophobic. Suddenly, one finds hatred, exclusion and persecution, where tolerance and compassion was once. An attempt was reported to fight the radicalization but it would have led to a position as an outsider which was feared more than the xenophobia. This leads to horror at one's own pussyfooting.

Polarization is also evident between European countries and in the national parliaments. Nationalist and authoritarian groups appear and become more influential. The European Union is as well not capable of maintaining solidarity and commonality.

Finally, discussed was polarization in the world between the wealthy and welfare states on one hand, and escape and misery in the civil war countries on the other hand. Yet our possibilities to end civil war and accommodate refugees are limited. For example, it is reported that all of a sudden a lot of government money for consulting is available but after years of cutbacks this does not really help.

Another example of polarization was the exploitation of the resources. Two members reported experiences that diseases because of smog in Indonesia cannot be cured by the clean air in Europe.

2. Incomprehensiveness leads to the desire for order and explanation and to disappointment towards the media and politics

It was reported that one does no longer understand current processes in society and the world and does not know any more what is true - for example, concerning the flood of refugees, the strengthening of the IS, the violence against women. One feels overwhelmed by the developments and needs orderliness and orientation. It was formulated that media and politics do not meet these needs, but on the contrary "betray the better"¹. In this context it was argued that uncertainty is triggered not by too little, but by too much information and too many different opinions. Feelings of helplessness and distrust were expressed. Several participants recalled experiences in the GDR, where information was systematically manipulated. The suspicion was formulated that nowadays, media and politics withhold essential information or let them disappear in the mass, especially in the social media.

3. Learning from others allows serenity and hospitality

Discussed were touching experiences in contact with refugees. The refugees are glad and grateful to be here and to be able to use the chances offered by our society, especially through security and

¹ "betray the best" / "betray what is better", in German „das Bessere verraten“

education. It was also reported from visitors in Berlin and their amazement at the security and freedom to move around here. These incidents are experienced as enrichment by the members of the group. Expresses is an emerging feeling of serenity against the otherwise threatening developments in the world.

Participants interpreted compassion and trust in the good as a childlike expression of fear and helplessness on one hand. On the other hand, it was argued, there is a necessity to overcome the fear of chaos. The gratification of the others allows us to reflect on basic values such as hospitality, helpfulness and compassion. Incomprehensible processes such as violence against women, dealing with sexuality and xenophobia confront us with our own shadow, and the projection of own fears onto others. In the confrontation with the incomprehensible and the threat we are all requested to become active and to counter uproar with serenity.

Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members are working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 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 are 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.

1. Social developments upset and lead on one hand to learning (self-authorization), on the other hand to opposition

The refugee- and before the Greece-crisis have questioned our sense of certainty. A natural confidence in the stability of the social and political framework, the respect of boundaries and the distribution of wealth has been lost.

This leads to contradictory developments. On one hand, we observe self-authorization in an unprecedented degree (volunteerism, helpfulness, hospitality, acceptance of responsibility, thoughtlessness, willingness to learn, culture of remembrance). On the other hand fears are growing and projected onto the strangers and the weak, which leads to violence, prosecutions of foreigners and those who stand up for them.

The hope emerges that value-oriented action will predominate and xenophobic impulses can be contained in our society.

2. Polarization and splitting in the society leads to safeguarding, but also leads into action.

Incomprehensible and rapid changes induce a feeling of overflow. Overflow is experienced through the inflow of many people who are fleeing poverty and persecution, but also in terms of information overkill and uncontrolled influences by social media.

Results are bewilderment and increased requests for support and guidance. This leads to demands for political leadership and information by the media as well as to anxiety-driven safeguarding; examples are fundamentalism, calling for stricter laws, or the emergence of neighbourhood protection groups (Bürgerwehr). Out of the wish for exclusion new fences are being built, that do not, however, change the porousness of borders.

These experiences lead into action and learning. A sense of serenity and confidence prevails that not only learning is possible, but also enrichment by changes, that are otherwise conceived as impertinent.

Conveners: Friedrich Wilhelm Lindemann, Ulrike Beland