



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

Ireland and the World at the Dawn of 2017
Report of a OPUS Listening Post®
held in Dublin on 27th January 2017

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & 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, 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 collectively was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

The session began with a silence. A member then spoke about the changes going on in the world at the moment and spoke about feeling worried about what was to happen next.

Another member then talked about feeling “skittish”. She had lost her coat on the way here but in looking for it had picked up a ring. She hadn’t been worried about the coat but she was worried about the key in its pocket. “Do I have time to be worried? There is so much going on.” she said. She was asked if she had found her coat. “Yes, I found it where I left it.” she answered.

After a short silence, a member talks about being “sick to death of all the analysis and at the same time I can’t get enough of it. No-one knows what’s going to happen but pronouncements are made with such assuredness.”

A member said she was “in touch with something that gives an illusion of power and control. Before the Brexit referendum and the USA elections I found myself obsessively checking polls, checking the news, as if it might give me control and certainty in the absolute knowledge that there is no certainty.”

“I’ve been preoccupied by boundaries and what has to be shut out and what is within that has to be protected. I’d like to talk to people who actually believe this, who are so fearful and determined to not let in.”

“I’m preoccupied with not knowing. Seeing something quite toytownish going on in

the world but it's not funny. It seems to be flooding us."

"I've seen independent research on climate change that says the problem isn't fossil fuel and then other research that says the opposite."

A member spoke of their sense that Donald Trump's appeal was that he would challenge this uncertainty. She spoke of only being able "to manage small shots of news". She continued that she found myself wanting to shut out the sight of so many ill and homeless people on the Dublin streets. "I feel strange, rattled by everything. Permeated by forces I'm not really conscious of."

Another member spoke of her anger with the national news media. "There was a news item on the main evening news on RTE. €88 million had been won in the Euro Millions draw by a syndicate in Cork. It was a whole news item with interviews and the next day it transpired that the prize had been won in Dublin and there was another news item on it. And on the same news bulletins more serious items are told by the journalists that "We've run out of time".

I listened to that I was getting angrier and angrier. I wondered if it was envy.

A member responded: "These are our links to Trump and illusion. Do I retreat or do I engage. Lotto and Trump. This person presents as someone who will make everything alright, like a lotto win."

"But there was a loss of hope in those middle areas of USA. An American friend told me that good work was done on the East and West coasts but middle USA wasn't worked with in the same way. How do you engage with this, the loss and lack. What to do? But at the same time I am hopeful. There are interesting things happening. The women's march after the inauguration, the large meeting about immigration."

"I heard about the march and I was afraid. All his election promises were coming real. What else did he say he was going to do?"

"I'm supposed to have woken up from this by now. This is real. He is doing this. Lines are being crossed, boundaries violated. When I was working in homelessness in Dublin, no child was allowed to remain on the streets. They were found accommodation. Now child homelessness is tolerated. Something has shifted here and with Trump, something has shifted.

"I was so angry when I heard the RTE radio report on the Euro Millions €88 million win in Ireland. Financial experts were interviewed to give advice on where to put the money so it can make the more money for the ticket holders. As if €88 million isn't enough! I got a lot of energy from the marches."

"I watched a video made by an Asian American who wrote and performed a song called "I Can't Keep Quiet." She got people via social media to learn it and they came together virtually to sing in. It's gone viral."

"I've been thinking of the Pussy Hats on the march. He used the term in a derogatory way. How does that get explained to your children? I'm not able to make

sense of it. Who creates, who owns our identity?"

"Trump has created his identity through social media. I've come off Facebook. Who are people? Do we know people? Now we have alter-identities."

"Pat Kenny (a national broadcaster) asked if he is a strategist or a lunatic. Perhaps he's both and."

"I wonder if it is going to turn conservative here because of the fear? I wonder about our voices. I thought about the Brexit referendum and the USA election and wondered if our own voice can be heard."

"I stopped myself asking 'What are the pussy hats? Are they a feminist thing?'. I was afraid I'd offend by using or linking to the word feminist. I'm in overload. I don't know what to think. I'm having the same conversations with no differences expressed in them. I'm interested in the Citizens' Assembly*. It is hopeful. But it is like we are talking to each other about Trump as opposed to the other side. Post-truth. I'm not on Facebook and I miss things but the cost of being on Facebook is to get the sanitised version of my friends' lives".

"I've got friends and relatives in the States who are pro-Trump. I'm afraid to say what I feel. Where can I speak what I feel? Is it safe to say what I feel? I was at Mass with my mother recently. The priest launched into a sermon about Satan being in the evil box in the corner. It sounded quite mad. My elderly mother asked me "Do you think he'd stop if we gave him an applause?"

"On an interview on the Pat Kenny Show recently, it was said that the world is actually a safer place now than it ever has been but that we get very afraid because we hear so much news. It's overload, it's too much. But the day will still go on and my life will still go on."

"I feel quite disturbed - a safer place, the spread of fear. Makes me think about what we set up so that we can put what we are fearful of outside ourselves."

"Power isn't all an illusion. Some boundary has shifted and what if we leave Trump and come back here. I'm reminded of the Celtic Tiger years and Fintan O'Toole's book The Ship of Fools. What is the Trump in here, in us? I'm probably over-preoccupied but in here I want to get beyond the illusion to something meaningful."

"I've been thinking of an organisation called Regret. It is a group of parents who consented to their daughters having the Cervical Cancer vaccine and the daughters have experienced side effects. How we can trust the best medical advice and things still happen. Regret is an Irish organisation."

"Ireland is one of the world's data centres. We are open to events in the world. Our identity as Irish is only partly contained in this Ireland. It also encompasses UK and USA. More and more people are coming in. I was standing on the platform at the train station recently and noticed that none of those on the platform appeared to have been born in Ireland. They were citizens of the world. Teresa May tells us that if you are a citizen of the world you are a citizen of nowhere. This is our wake up

call. Last night was the Chinese New Year, the year of the rooster - the wake up call. How interdependent we all are and how sensitive to Brexit and Trump we are.”

“Sinn Fein have taken down a wall with the recent gender changes at leadership levels. Is it hypocrisy or a response to reality? Recently I’ve become a reader of the Irish News (published in Belfast). I can’t get over the difference. There are so many stories of terrorist happenings and not much notice has been taken. Teresa Villiers the last Northern Ireland Secretary had a strong influence on Arlene Foster (First Minister) and DUP voted to leave the EU. I believe the Brexit leaders didn’t think they would win and I think Trump didn’t think he was going to win. Steve Bannon, Trump’s Director of Policy, he’s Irish. It seems such a sudden change in Sinn Fein from macho organisation to promoting women to leadership positions.”

“Maybe fear is a preoccupation. Despite a belief that the world, overall, is a safer place,” (the speaker referenced Stephen Pinker’s book *The Better Angels of our Nature*) “planet earth certainly isn’t a safer place. I’m looking at our generation. How have we let the earth come to such a bad place? It doesn’t feel safe at all for our children and the next generations.”

“I listened to a Human Rights leader being interviewed on radio this morning, he sounded arrogant about his beliefs and I felt angry. We can’t fight arrogance with arrogance. I have a sense of having retreated to somewhere where I don’t know what’s going on and I don’t have influence. I’ve protected myself and I’m not getting my hands dirty by engaging with the other side.”

“I wrote a letter to the abortion rights campaign recently. I felt afraid of its arrogance. I had a sense that they might not let me in. Are we ready for the fight. Are we ready for this?”

“It feels very polarised, from one right to another right.”

“We are back to security and insecurity. Brexit seemed to reinforce a sense of security. This retreat will make England feel more secure whereas in Ireland, the emergence of the border again won’t feel safe at all. Something about what Trump says makes people feel secure. There is a profound sense of insecurity and need for a profound sense of security.”

“I was in the mid U.S.A in the summer. I was standing at a bus stop with a woman who was not well off. She spoke about being so delighted about Trump, his vision, and she believed in him. I felt utterly silenced but then I gently asked her if she was aware that many in U.S.A. and Europe don’t think Trump is a good thing for the U.S. and the world. I stood for 20 minutes as she told me how we in Europe had been fed untruths.

* Citizens’ Assembly was set up last year as a “demographically and geographically representative group of 99 citizens” run under the auspices of the Department of the Taoiseach to make recommendations on a possible abortion referendum and other constitutional and political issues. Members were selected by a polling company and the Assembly is chaired by Supreme Court judge Ms Justice Mary Laffoy .

The themes of preoccupation included the following:

- Information overload, confusion, not knowing what to believe.
- Stirred to write letters and not use social media.
- Polarisation and binary thinking is predominating to the exclusion (and paralysis) of the middle position - the uncertain position. A competition between global and local concerns.
- There have been shifts in the boundaries of what is acceptable.
- Feelings of fear despite reassurances of security:
 - in me;
 - in the room: what can't be said in here? will I be attacked?;
 - in the region (Teresa May and Brexit)
 - in the world (President Trump).
- It is not clear what is real and what is unreal?
- Preoccupation with security and insecurity; control/protection and loss of control
- A sense of regret; is this is a wake-up call?
- Desire for cross-generational conversations - history, future, hope.
- Sinn Féin - we ourselves - a change of image, style, policy, generation, gender, sensitivity?
- We need to make spaces in which to nurture hope, dialogue with others, not just ourselves, and particularly the younger generation.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants 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, participants 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: Because we are feeling insecure and fearful, members of society have become controlling and reactive which has led to a confusion about what is true or real.

Hypothesis 2: Because we need hope, members of society are initiating gatherings and groups and using means of conversation and expression such as letters which give voice to alienated vulnerability. Perhaps this represents an attempt to resist polarised post-truthism and to nurture a more inclusive dialogue.

Hypothesis 3: The middle position between the polarised extremes is very difficult to hold because of the amount and immediacy of information and images sent which we hope will satiate our need to know and our need to be contained but which in actuality bloats us and makes us anxious, uncomfortable and angry and then either harkening to extremist positions or are paralysed to inaction.

Hypothesis 4: Our own slice of citizenry (perhaps a monologue ?) is deluded, dazed, undifferentiated, flooded with anxiety and showing signs of trauma as our preconceived realities are being unravelled; and is this a bad thing?

Convenor: Jude Bowles