



## Canada at the dawn of 2018

### Report of a Listening Post held in Toronto on 11 January 2018

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#### **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, 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.*

In this part of the discussion, we explored 'what's on peoples' minds looking back to 2017: even in Canada, it is not possible to think about 2017 without considering the significant impact of the US election, the presence of Trump, and his outrageous ways of relating to and with the 'other'. He evokes fear in many and acts as a concrete figure for the 'robber barons' who are seen in Canada as part of 'the 1%', holding 50% of the wealth. These figures control wealth in dollars and influence; they control land and its use. In Canada, we continue to have significant and increasing concern for inequality especially the inability to adequately house a large number of citizens as more and more 'land development' wipes out affordable rental stock. There is a severe housing crisis in the urban centres and across the country. And even though many cities in Canada have poverty reduction strategies, these are largely ineffective. More and more people are unable to remain in costly urban centres – poverty reduction plans often amount to 'pushing the poor out'. Many participants related to the increasing 'nastiness' that pervades our public interactions and most especially with those in institutions who are intended to 'serve' such as health and education. The 'social pact' that could once be relied upon – however difficult in past times, now seems completely broken. For example, there are only 2 bread companies and 3 grocery conglomerates in Canada and recently a key one, Loblaws, acknowledged a long-standing practice of bread price-fixing. And because they came forward, they were able to make a deal not to be prosecuted. Participants experience significant disaffection with the dishonesty of what once more reliable institutions and businesses. The very bread we eat is a source of lies, impunity and value for the rich. It was felt that more and more people experience mental health challenges, exacerbated by poverty and distrust, with less and less adequate services to care for citizens.

Participants spoke about the effect of social media and its relation to shortened spans-of-attention, making it impossible to have sustained critical analyses of 'what's going on' and explore the truth of what's happening. For example, the recent Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Recommendations (regarding centuries of indigenous genocide) can fade quickly from public consciousness, as do the demands of Black Lives Matter (Canada) or #MeToo. Even our once-trusted activists and movements seem unable to press toward deeper analysis in their thinking and actions. If, as we believe, artificial intelligence and inequality dominates the world, there will be more disaffection, vulnerability and a fewer number will have even more privilege. And yet, there are some small signs of hope: the recent extension of public transit means it is possible for citizens to move throughout the city, increased minimum wage, recent college strikes may well spell the awakening of renewed union capacity and influence, and new pop-up injection sites point toward a somewhat more informed and caring public.

## **PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

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

### **Theme 1: The social pact is broken**

There is a collective loss of trust and hope in civic institutions and growing inequality, which more and more meet the corporate desires of the very wealthy while the poor get poorer. Unlike our reliance (some might suggest as fantasy) of a country in which there seemed to be social regard, more citizen-citizen and institution-citizen concern, there is now an experience of flagrant contempt for the needs of each and every citizen – especially the poor and disenfranchised. The data are: the lack of stable, proper or affordable housing for many, while developers build housing for other wealthy citizens; growing (and more notable/noticed) racism, anti-semitism, Islamaphobia, sexual violence and harassment toward women by men (#MeToo), and hate crimes (actual numbers have increased); more explicit racist public comments that go un-challenged; more corporate unlawfulness (Loblaws, GoldCore) with impunity; a loss of trust in the democratic systems of journalism, justice, education, and health.

### **Theme 2: There is a significant inability to think critically and an interference with sustained analysis**

Social media, once thought to be the harbinger of greater honesty, has become rife with rapid text exchanges and empty messages, fabrications or outright lies has made it very difficult if not impossible to sustain discussion and critical thinking about 'what is going on'. The data are: Trump's tweets, fake news, members' own experience of how rare and challenging the LP-like discussions are.

### **Theme 3: Civil society activism/education and dissent has been rendered powerless and ineffective**

Where once reasonably strong and reliable unions, activist networks and

coalitions have utilized public and institutional spaces to achieve important social change, these have become less and less effective as the democratic spaces shrink and resistance is prohibited, disavowed or criminalized. The data are: civil society actors, organizations, and networks are not as effective in leveraging change as they once were; are quite disorganized or not more broadly linked; settle for very small gains and have difficulties mobilizing citizens for change.

### **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.*

#### **Analysis and Hypothesis**

##### **Analysis and Hypothesis 1: Grief, hatred and fear characterize our unequal social and civic relations**

**Analysis:** We feel ourselves grieving the loss of the once-agreed upon social pact and are terrified by and envious of the 'robber barons' and figures of authority who greedily take more and more and care less and less for citizen welfare. Their greed, control over our lives, refusal to provide adequate care, and flagrant abuse of democratic processes has provoked enormous loss of the sense of self and agency.

**Hypothesis:** Members have all but abandoned the wish for a good-enough other and mourn reliable social pact. There is a sense of frantic-individualism, purposeful nationalism, splitting (all good or all bad) and an impulse to take care only of one's self that threatens to override a capacity for collective/social well-being. We have therefore developed the perverse illusion that only the self is to be trusted and therefore less and less able to make supportive relations with each other. And yet – small glimpses of the possible still remain which citizens hang onto.

##### **Analysis and Hypothesis 2. Inability to think and make sense of uncertainty**

**Analysis:** We literally cannot think clearly. Too much information bombards us, too much data is incorrect or false yet is asserted as 'the truth'. Our authority figures are not able to 'hold' society in a complete fashion and there are very few spaces that can enable the exploration or containment of strong emotions in such a way that thoughts can arise and provide insight.

**Hypothesis:** In the desperate attempt to construct an ego ideal – an idealized concept of one's self in the face of the perverse other (be it Trump, or public

institutions, or male harassers – strong and primitive feelings arise. These result in a precarious sense of agency, a perversion of the social bonds, and a nostalgia for what was but perhaps has never really been.

### **Analysis and Hypothesis 3: Chronic anxiety and dread in the face of helplessness**

**Analysis:** Faced with a cruel and 'greedy other', participants experience a chronic state of dread. This feeling state makes it more and more difficult to build and sustain interpersonal and community relations. And as a result, more and more citizens experience mental health issues and ask for a more that they cannot receive.

**Hypothesis:** Faced with a loss of the fantasy of safety and security, which should be provided by the 'good-enough other', primitive feelings of dread and annihilation emerge. The result is that subjects must confront the desire for a thing that does not exist from an/other and illusion that the self can provide all that is necessary. So disorienting is this experience, that it is impossible not to become more and more helpless.

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