



Ireland at the dawn of 2018

Report of a Listening Post held in Dublin on 19 January 2018

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.

The session began with a reference to the weather: how cold it is and how different it feels from 10 years ago. Yet there is a denial of climate change. Our storms now are named for the first time.

'Storms' became a leitmotif.

The following remark described how Micheál Martin TD (Leader of Fianna Fáil, one of Ireland's dominant political parties with a broadly centrist perspective.), the leader of Fianna Fáil, had this week made a speech in the Dáil in which he announced that he had changed his position and now supports the repeal of the 8th Amendment (voted by referendum into the Irish Constitution in 1983 - it recognises the equal right to life of the mother and her unborn child and created a constitutional recognition of an unborn child's life so making it impossible for any government to introduce legislation allowing for terminations in the womb except in exceptional circumstances) and the drawing up of legislation to allow abortion in Ireland. The member said "I cried. His speech completely turned my world upside down."

"I find myself confused – living moment by moment – with real clarity and real confusion sitting side by side. Knowing and not knowing sitting side by side. A reference was made to an art exhibit: 'In Case of Emergency, 13-10-17' - "what is it? – feeling it –I didn't understand"

"I'm in touch with power and changing power and who has it at an individual level. Taking back power, e.g. abortion. Who has a say. At a macro level - who has power at the top – people in senior positions – Presidents, and the damage they can do, but yet they remain in position and are still supported by so many."

"I'm scared about the forthcoming Referendum (on whether or not to repeal the 8th Amendment). I heard that those opposed to change have brought in the group that helped win the Brexit vote. Facts seem to have lost value. If facts don't matter, then women speaking up about their experiences might not matter."

"Feels discordant but I'm thinking of a lot of turbulence, uncertainty, things falling part. There have been three national emergencies recently: Storm Ophelia; Homelessness and Hospital Accident and Emergency Departments. High level teams are put together in response. There is no clear sense of what the future might be but I have a sense that the old order is coming to an end. It feels shaky but maybe it's hopeful – election of Leo Varadkar and Macron."

"I'm really struck by how mankind just doesn't learn. We continue to repeat again and again. Civilisations come and go. Civilisation gets caught up in greed until it crashes again. All there is to do is work a day at a time. Do what we are able to do."

"What is believable and unbelievable? Who do we believe? It is easy to switch off. Things like the behaviour of the Guards, the treatment of Maurice McCabe (a whistleblower). So much is unbelievable. Take Brexit. People believed it enough to vote to leave. Do we believe TV more than our own experiences? If we could get people to slow down, reflect and think. That was what was amazing about the Citizens' Assembly (an exercise in deliberative democracy by the Irish Government which has 100 citizen members and meets to hear expert, impartial and factual advice, in order to consider important legal and policy issues facing Irish society), it took time to reflect and consider rather than debate and react. How can we get the country to do that?"

This was followed by a member informing or reminding the group that 3 monkeys escaped from Dublin Zoo during the Storm Ophelia. It bought the zoo to a close. One of the monkeys was enticed back by an apple

"Like Adam and Eve."

"Two had to be tranquilised to capture them."

"They only got out of their cage, not their enclosure."

"It sounds like if you don't stay in your cage you'll be tranquillized. All these emergencies. Who says it was a national emergency?"

The repeal of the 8th – who are the people changing their minds? Is it real? it doesn't suit their image. "I'm wondering about manipulation. Are minds changing because deep seated beliefs have altered or because people want to fit in? The Healy-Raes' (a political and business family from Kilgarvan in Co Kerry) have stuck to their beliefs and explained why they believe them. They get so much abuse. To be yourself and say what you want to say is unsafe. It is safer to be manipulated and say what people want you to say."

"I worked on the marriage equality referendum and it was the conversations at home that changed minds, not social media."

"Is that not just what we are being told? I've heard how people ran the campaign. What about the individual being able to say what they want to say. it's very difficult to speak. For the younger generation it's hard to say anything other than this is good, this is bad and really what is good is to be on the winning side. I just feel manipulated."

"It relates to power. My experience during the marriage equality referendum was that people who were opposed to it seemed to have no problem telling me to my face that they didn't agree with it. There was a large institution (the church) involved in supporting one side."

"How politically correct the world has gone and it's not safe to express an opinion. I've heard about college lecturers who have to give a safety notice before debates letting student know that they might be offended."

"The monkeys in the zoo were still caught. How much freedom is there? Is it safe to have an open debate?"

"Before campaigning there were always institutions who told us what do say."

"Dogma needs challenging and what better way to do it than with the truth."

"How do we talk about values, opinions?"

"Surely it's more important to speak from our life experience."

"After the Harvey Weinstein story was exposed, the French actress Catherine Deneuve spoke out about how men needed to be able to flirt, but she had to apologise for having this opinion. I defend the right to express one's views. Sometimes my husband expresses views that are abhorrent to my children. They can express their abhorrence, but they still respect him. There doesn't seem to be space for that sort of exchange anymore."

"I don't know. Just before I came here I had was debating with a friend about Lisa Chambers' (a Fianna Fáil politician) statement in the Dail. We disagreed, and the argument was a robust one, but we're ok. I feel like I'm having conversations I could never have before."

"Everybody is so busy trying to make decisions in our best interest but actually we have absolutely no idea what is going on in people's everyday lives. Making decisions based on values and principles can be dangerous because we don't know what actually goes on for people."

"Conversation is important but there has to be outrage. Think of what courage is required to stand up. Think of how many Syrian's have spoken up and how many have died. It takes such courage to speak".

"It's not safe to have values though. Feel now if someone talks from values you have to come up with the evidence base behind it"

"Perhaps it's not mutually exclusive. Perhaps we can still debate and still have values."

"But our values have been imposed, we have been manipulated and used."

"There is a huge sense of oppression in here. It feels that we can't speak. However, the paradox is that people are speaking. There have never been so many opportunities and avenues to speak and talk. There is so much recounting of personal experiences like on Joe Duffy (a phone in radio show on RTE)"

"There is a sense of depression in here. There is a lot of black and grey clothes. Very little colour and the group is feeling increasingly depressed by the themes. Depression coming in, coming down on me."

"At one point I felt the noise outside in the street was so much that it was coming in on top of us."

"I'm wondering what we have to celebrate? Yet my daughter is 21 so I have something personal to celebrate."

"Like yourself, I've two new grandchildren. I want things to be better for them."

"I'm tired of being afraid and overwhelmed. Things weren't much better before. Trump is here now. Would Hilary Clinton as President of USA have made things better? She is still part of the political dynasties. I do have the outrage, but I want it to fuel resistance and I am feeling more hopeful because of anger."

"I'm feeling huge energy at the moment. Look at the EU context. In Ireland there have been positive changes while other EU countries have lost ground. I do feel a certain energy. There are new ways of sharing ideas, having conversations and organising the resistance – galvanizing and finding people you want to work with."

"Young people in Ireland are growing up in a different climate. They don't passively accept things."

"I've experience of a young people joining extreme Catholic organisations. Radical Catholics. I worry that conservatism will creep back in."

"I don't think that conservatism as the backbone of Irish society has gone. When something gets taken away it becomes popular again."

"Sometimes the system pulls us back. If you want to get your kids into the local national school you still have to baptise them."

"I read an article recently saying that the British voted for Brexit because they had lost an Empire and found it impossible to be on an equal footing with other

countries. "

"We Irish want to be special. We are afraid of change."

"Is there something about losing our identity and creating a blandness?afraid of losing a sense of who we really are."

"I think the horse has bolted and we are trying to close the stable door."

"But why do we find it so difficult to trust in personal responsibility? Why do we need a power to tell us how to be?"

"Why do we find it so difficult to trust ourselves?"

"An individual taking responsibility for decisions made needs an imprimatur."

"It's hard to take personal responsibility. There is a lot of anxiety attached. My daughter is pregnant and does not want to take the flu vaccine. She experiences a lot of pulling and dragging - persuasion and criticism. That's a lot of responsibility if it goes wrong. What is safe to say, what is safe to do?"

"In electing Trump Americans got what they wanted - to go back to the past and make them great again. I presume that dynamic is here too."

"A craving for certainty in uncertainty."

"I'm living with my adult children now. They have come back to live in the family home. It's quite scary because I'm in my 50s and I was hoping that at this point I would have a calmer, more reflective life. I have a desire for calm. Today I went to a Chi Gong session. The teacher said he would talk about it to me. I replied "no", I just want to do it. In Chi Gong I stay upright. Working on my own connectedness and staying steady."

"I was struck by Micheál Martin's statement on supporting the repeal of the 8th Amendment this week. It put people in a spin and created spaces to talk like on Joe Duffy."

"Are our grown-up children turning to Sinn Fein?"

"No, the extremes are around."

"My daughter said the person I vote for will be one who can solve the homeless crisis and create rents at a fair price."

"Nirvana perhaps?"

"My daughter thought our old bedsit system that we had was great - small and independent." "Give me my own place that is mine"

"Perhaps we all have another experience of homelessness. Another type of

homelessness is that the structures aren't holding us and that's a homelessness of sorts."

"I'm conscious of a storm inside me and I'm wondering how to be with the storm. Can I find a home in the storm or will I be homeless."

"The storm inside you is a manufactured storm. You need to find a space for expression of it. Where do we find a space for the storm."

"Can we release our storm in a safe place - in a place where the person we release the storm to sticks by you."

"I so look forward to coming to this event each year but I was shocked at myself - I was already working out who I was aligned to and who would be in my group (in part two)."

"The amount of time we spend looking for safe spaces, we miss so much - our spontaneity."

"Do I believe in the calm before the storm? I'm looking for a fight to clear the air and get to the truth."

"But you could be shot."

"I don't want to live in a safe calm place. I want some of it of course."

"The most painful moments I've had is when it's not safe but those are the times when I have been moved and have moved."

"The swimmers who went out in the storm in Galway got shot down and berated on Joe Duffy. But the woman who tragically died in the storm when a tree fell on the car while she was driving her mother didn't get berated. I wonder if that was because she died?"

"You can choose to go out on the edge but you take a risk."

"There is a quote I know: "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space.""

"It's really good to see someone in power like Micheál Martin changing his mind."

"Unless you go to the edge.... How to have a fight... Can we express different opinions and still go for tea."

"Where's the war?"

"We've come so far to talk and accept people with difference."

"Sinn Fein elected its leader this week but didn't have an election. Elected by dictat."

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Members divided into three groups to discuss what they heard in Part One and cluster them into themes. The themes that emerged included the following:

- Climate change - Calm vs Storm- Celebrating the storm; Fear of the storm; Storm – internal / external
- The need for courage the importance of trust. Can we live on the edge?
- Paradox – a sense of wanting to do something but holding back for fear. What does it take to be able to do this?
- The fear of change, the desire for safety
- A sense of identities changing which feels like the loss of an old order but has the new one emerged yet? Are we as yet homeless?
- Uncertainty and conflict about what we know and what we think others know
- What do we hear? Who do we hear it from? Who holds the power, the control, the manipulation? Who determines who is being heard?
- There is a human need for certainty, belonging and connectivity.
- Is safety blandness? Is tranquil safety a tranquilised place?
- National Emergencies – who decides what is a national emergency – are they real? Is it a storm or just a bit of wind? Do we demand to be kept safe? Do we trust what we hear? What is believable – fake news ?
- We are feeling homeless at a physical and spiritual level. It is a metaphor for the changing order.
- If we can we take personal responsibility we don't need to blame or talk about being done to.
- There is evidence of an energy around new campaigning and resistance places where we can authorise ourselves to have the difficult debates and conversations and survive. There is evidence of an energy "a bursting", and a desire to do so (i.e. burst out) but without blame and judgement.
- Impact of Micheal Martin – changing position. Is it now safe to express our different values? Do we have to be on the winning side? Who controls the winning side?
- We are born into conversations that we have been having forever. We are

simply repeating the same conversations but in our context.

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:

Our deep and human need to belong and our desire to feel connected and to feel safe leaves us vulnerable to manipulation and to an abuse of power. This can lead to the silencing of our voices. Also, perhaps, to a desire for resistance depending on our capacity to sit with the turbulence and feel unsafe, uncertain and unknowing and at ease with our differences.

Hypothesis 2:

Our world is changing. The old certainties are gone. Society has lost faith with conventional leadership. In this space we can feel homeless and in touch with the line from W.B. Yeats' "The centre cannot hold". In this space we are actively searching for courageous and coherent leadership at a personal, collective and political level.

Hypothesis 3:

We are born into conversations which form part of our identity and have been shaped by powerful institutions. But now we are filled to overflowing like the champagne cork about to pop. When and where is it safe to burst? Can we find places where we can name our differences, our values and life experiences and not be fearful of the consequences? Places where the conversations in our heads can be challenged, disengaged from blame and personal responsibility can be taken up. We are wanting to take up our own authority and have our individual voices heard rather than be caged in set narratives of for and against or silence. These new places are emerging. They include new ways of campaigning, new places and groups in which to have conversations and new ways of informing policy makers.

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