



UK at the dawn of 2018

Report of a Listening Post held in London on 10 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.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Theme 1: Inter-generational tensions

A participant spoke of a topsy-turvy world and reflected on her life so far: approaching middle age, balancing the positives with the negatives, her role as a parent, of having established a clear role, of greater life expectancy. But she also speaks of inter-generational tensions, the younger generation experiencing delayed inheritance benefits and of her daughter being generally less fortunate – 'lucked out' – e.g. not having the same opportunities for owning a home. This generates a sense of guilt – of having something that the next generation may not have. There was also a sense of having developed 'survivor skills'.

Another participant said it reminded him of the possibility of 'survivor guilt', of a sort of shame for having achieved something in life.

A second woman spoke of the 'all-in-black' women at the recent Golden Globe 'film awards' mourning in solidarity for so many young women in Hollywood who had spoken out, 'reported', historical incidences of sexual abuse and exploitation at the hands of powerful and famous men in the film industry over several decades. This, in turn, has led to examination of a wider issue of the sexual conduct of men in the workplace. The difference between 'rape' as a clear offence but the complex ambiguity surrounding flirtatious sexual contact has been highlighted by some well known actresses (female actors). A woman notes she had subsequently and unwittingly dressed in black, which was noticed by

another woman at work, and wonders whether 'unconsciously' she is also making a protest.

One participant suggested a glimpse of optimism in the upsurge of public protest about many things – demonstrations on the streets, 'we're not going to take this any more' attitude, the refusal to 'gloss things over'. Another example cited was the outrage about recent incidents of sexual harassment. Participants noted that 'some kind of redefinition is taking place of what it means to be a man in relation to women in the office'. However, one participant expressed relief at Catherine Deneuve's intervention suggesting that the issue was more complex than was acknowledged by the #metoo movement.

Theme 2: Fear of impending disaster

There was reference to the short science fiction story 'The Machine Stops' (by E.M. Forster, 1909) in which survivors of a post-holocaust world are living underground and dependent on the life-supporting 'machine' which suddenly fails. They are unfamiliar with the world above ground and are disorientated and struggle to make sense of it when the 'machine stops'. They pull the blind down as they see the Himalayas from the train's window as it is too powerful an image to comprehend. Various parallels were alluded to in respect of our own dependencies on technology and whether we can keep up with the rapid changes we are experiencing.

A participant made a similar observation regarding Brexit: 'the Government is being torn apart by internal conflict and, it seems, constantly near the edge of breakdown', leading to a 'fear of chaos' because, in reality, things are not under control.

A participant noted that denial was a necessary defence for many that could not simply be torn away. Things are so wrong in society that nobody knows what to do about them – they have to be denied and blamed on 'the appalling spend thrift attitudes of the previous generation or Government' or on the 'appalling demands of the other' which have to be managed away through denial and further cutbacks. The prevention of integration between health and social care forces responsibility back to the individual who is left to manage as best they can.

Theme 3: retreat from the complexity of social engagement

The first participant to speak is feeling more optimistic during the last week but does not elaborate much.

There was much sharing of the need for 'personal space', the value of 'having time on my own', e.g. before re-engaging with family after work or re-engaging with social networks and the social world more generally. There is a need to take time out to think, to take time to breath, to slow down before opening a door on arriving home: the value of the 'Listening Post' as a highly valued but rare 'space', the joy of solitude and the need to 're-charge' in 'private time' as a counterweight

to normal experience.

Participants discussed how social media, for example Facebook, invites us to 'like', 'follow' or be a 'friend', giving evidence of a social world full of binary choices and shallow commitments: if you are not a 'friend' you must be a 'not friend', and if you don't choose to accept the invitation to 'Like' it means you don't 'Like'. We live in complex societies spreading outwards to others on the other side of the world but in shallow and depersonalised ways: you can have e-friends who you can easily 'un-friend' or 'de-friend' without explaining why. Posting something on Twitter or Facebook and refusing dialogue to discuss your views with others is not 'engaging' with the other. You can cause offence without accountability.

A participant remarked that, nowadays, it was not enough to 'like' your employer, you had to 'love' them (unconditionally). 'You have to learn to love Big Brother' someone adds. Another comments further – 'You have to say that nothing is wrong – pretending, like the selfie, that in spite of imperfection you can create the perfect picture.' On taking a holiday - 'We can create, take control of, a preferred version of the world for ourselves!' The denial of the impact of austerity, massive cuts, and its effects and that something can be done only by 'taking money away' or 'throwing money at it' is another binary choice. Someone asks 'Do we switch off our thinking capacity, turn a blind eye in order to cope?' Another asks 'Is it a mixture of denial and cynicism because things are so wrong it is too hard to push it aside and deal with the realities?'

Theme 4: denial of ugliness - illusion of the perfect self

A woman reflected on her holiday in South-East Asia, an area where the tsunami of 2004 had caused devastation, and of being an observer to a young couple apparently seeking to take 'the perfect selfie'. There is little evidence now of the impact along the coastline above sea level and the young couple, totally absorbed spending half an hour or more taking selfies, were not including the high water mark of the tsunami on the wall in front of them. They were seemingly trying to create 'the perfect image'. By arranging their image in front of a beautiful background, presumably to share on social media, were they only concerned with creating the 'perfect picture' but not actually 'living the experience'? Was this a reflection of a wider social phenomenon, a lived fantasy rather than a lived experience in the here and now? The aspirations for perfection in the context of a recovered resort contrasted with the woman's later experience whilst scuba diving of seeing underwater, below the surface, the post-tsunami devastation to the coral reef which will take years to recover. She wondered about what might be 'below the surface' in another context and how we will communicate with each other, with the continuing advance of technology, in 20 years' time.

Another woman who had re-visited France on holiday recently expressed her relief at feeling good whilst there for the first time, without feeling the need to 'show off' or 'make a statement', and enjoying the experience for itself. She noted

that she did not feel the need to post something on Facebook – she was too absorbed enjoying herself. Perhaps when you're enjoying yourself you don't need to pretend that you are by posting something on social media?

In noting the 'need to switch off' another person wondered about the apparent 'narcissism on a mass scale', and the preoccupation with creating a more perfect self through surgery which is now possible through advances in medicine. Medical science is now so good, can we aspire to making ourselves perfect? The idea of a split between the 'private self', the 'public self' has now been added to by a 'public private self' – a self image constructed for public display and transmission e.g. through social media.

A participant cited more evidence of the narcissistic preoccupation with aspirations to make oneself perfect: the most popular app, created by a woman in South Korea who has set herself up in a successful business advising people how to create the perfect selfies and has now opened a highly successful beauty salon.

Another participant suggested that it may be wonderful what medical science can now do to repair a damaged body but, by covering up ugliness (through cosmetic surgery), it creates an illusion of perfection and feeds the fantasy of creating perfection.

A participant linked this to the idea of ugliness in politics being covered over with the lies of 'false news' and the truth is called 'fake news' if it is inconvenient, for example, to Trump. The denial by our own politicians of problems in public services is an attempt to deny the ugliness of the truth. Evidence was presented to a committee in Washington by an eminent psychiatrist expressing concern about Trump's mental state because it was 'in the public interest' to do so.

There was some discussion about the term 'narcissistic' and its correct usage; one participant suggested that the term, properly used, described an individual 'struggling to sustain a self in relation to others'.

One participant observed that 'I'm only human after all', the title of a very successful recent song, seemed to give legitimacy to being 'self-centred' or 'selfish' if not 'narcissistic'. If anyone challenged the veracity of Trump's tweets, they were accused of spreading 'fake news'. 'Speaking truth to power' is sometimes rejected by politicians as being 'party political'; an alternative 'truth' is broadcast. It is as if the evidence before our own eyes cannot be spoken about. Al Gore's 'An Inconvenient Truth' received only minority support.

A participant noted that, faced with a 'tsunami of bad news', we can feel very impotent; anticipating yet another 'horror story', we switch off literally and emotionally but we do not seem to know how to be effective. Perhaps the selfie, in trying to capture the perfect moment, is evidence of emotional numbness. After the selfie, what next?

The idea of the tsunami was taken up by another participant to suggest a fear

that we might be 'washed away' by so much happening in the world. The spectre of a world threatened by global warming is rarely in the news but it does get attention and exposure in 'The Blue Planet' as if 'global warming' has been denigrated to an entertainment channel where it can be combined with images of beautiful things and thereby becomes more tolerable.

Narcissism, someone observes, makes integration impossible and makes it much harder to be in the present and is characterised by an impoverished quality of understanding. When there was more consensus we talked to each other across organisational boundaries. Narcissism in management where a 'perfect picture' must be presented allows the denial of failure and lies about the reality: it makes it harder to work in a world that demands more integration because it forces us apart and increases our sense of isolation and powerlessness. Because you have to continue to do your job you are forced to enter into a collusive relationship with the management of the organisation in order to keep your job. Following blindly as best you can contrasts sharply with the control experienced in choosing a holiday.

Another participant observed that narcissism makes it hard to be really present; narcissists in leadership positions or positions of power, create silos – such as in the dysfunctional split between health and social care services. We need a more joined-up focus but integration now seems even further away. Participants agreed that we feel we have to make sense as best we can when experiencing a sense of powerlessness and impotence because others are making decisions for us which affect us all. A public sector worker says he has to meet savings targets and does but experiences a sense of extortion when he succeeds.

A participant noted that not only do A & E departments experience high demand over the Christmas period but also the incidence of marital breakdown is high. Another suggested that 'when the wrapping paper is removed, the ugliness underneath is revealed'. Christmas decorations highlighted the artificiality of the happiness being created.

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 1: Inter-generational tensions

The younger generation are being disadvantaged in comparison to the previous generation – the financial demands due to austerity, student loans and house ownership problems, and the increasing life expectancy of the older generation leading to inheritance delays.

The emergence of widespread allegations and reporting of historical sexual abuse, even from decades earlier, against those who are, or were, in powerful and privileged positions has led to collective and thereby empowered demands of 'survivors' for exposure of the alleged offenders and justice. 'Statements' are given even if there is no prospect of a 'conviction'. What was hidden, endured, socially tolerated or repressed has now to be challenged and brought into the open. The roles of men in relation to women, especially in the workplace, is under examination as a consequence.

Hypothesis 1: Citizens experience a generational divide. Those who are younger demand change but without a sense of agency: they expect change to be delivered for them rather than by them; whilst those who are older experience 'survivor guilt' for having pursued self-gratification without considering its wider and longer-term impact for others, and shame for turning a blind eye to the consequences of their own and others' self-indulgence.

Theme 2: Fear of impending disaster

Politicians struggle to 'be in control': there are continuing Brexit uncertainties, Trump is not in control of the extreme right wing nor of 'white supremacists' who voted for him, and Theresa May is having difficulty maintaining control over her Cabinet. If those in power are not in control, what increasing risks are we exposed to?

Following the reference to the short story 'The Machine Stops', are we now 'living in a fantasy world', 'below the surface' so that we can disavow the reality above in the 'real world' which is too scary to deal with? Are we in a 'machine' in danger of catastrophically stopping?

Hypothesis 2: Citizens fear chaos in society and in the global world as it mirrors their own vulnerabilities to ill health and the aging process (disintegration on a personal level). They shield themselves from the distress associated with contemplating the true ugliness of things within the world by denial. Because they do not feel part of the solution, they switch off literally and psychologically rather than anxiously await the next horror story.

Theme 3: retreat from the complexity of social engagement

We experience an impulse to escape from or postpone social re-engagement, including with friends and family, in order to recover from the frenetic world of work and social networks – the search for solitude and protected personal space – but also organise our holidays as episodes over which we have complete choice and control.

In parallel, we experience the denials of complexity by those in power in organisations and at a political level. The true impact of austerity and the cut-

backs in public services are not acknowledged by politicians and policy makers including executives at local level. Blatant denials, counter arguments, defensive and propagandist statements give rise to cynicism and an increasing sense of impotence and disempowerment within society amongst those not in power.

We depend on those who make clear unambiguous decisions because we need the complexity of the world to be managed, or taken away on our behalf. We welcome the idea of regulation as an attempt to make decisions easier, to reduce ambiguity and anxiety in decision making, but our experience of it can have the opposite effect. We recycle what we can because the opportunity to do so has been provided but not with any expectation that it will make a difference.

Hypothesis 3: Because citizens do not believe that their individual effort will make a difference, they prefer to export the responsibility into the hands of others and complain when they fail. They seek binary choices because it reduces complexity and the responsibility to think. They seek to escape into solitude and fantasies of control to avoid any consequent senses of hopelessness, disempowerment, impotence and emotional numbness.

Analysis 4: denial of ugliness - illusion of the perfect self

We experience a world full of narcissistic pre-occupations at the individual, societal, organisational and political level in which the uglinesses of the world cannot be acknowledged or consciously tolerated with an escape into a fantasy and binary-choice world. Social media does not opportune true dialogue but presents polarised, binary choices as if to make a complex world simpler: you can choose to 'like' or 'dislike', to accept an invitation to be a 'friend' but you can also 'unfriend'. Your loyalty to your employer must be absolute, almost 'worship', thereby denying any problems in the workplace or the reporting of such for fear of 'human resources' being called in to 'investigate you'. What is now the nature of the social as well as the employment contract?

We are preoccupied with personally creating the illusion of a perfect self, a perfect setting for the 'selfie', a perfect experience whilst turning a 'blind eye' to the uglinesses of the world such as human causes of damage to the environment: the consequences and reality of global warming is left to the 'Blue Planet II' series where beautiful images make it easier to tolerate.

Hypothesis 4: Citizens deny their own impotence to make the world a better place by seeking refuge in fantasies of perfection and magical thinking. This increase in narcissistic pre-occupations avoids the need to face up to existential threats such as that presented by global warming and reduces social engagement to the most superficial and artificial kind in which all ugliness and imperfection is banished.

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