



An Organisation for Promoting  
Understanding of Society

## UK in the spring of 2019

### Report of Listening Post held in London on 3 April 2019

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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 experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; a members of religious, political, neighbourhood or 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', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.*

#### **Part 2. Identification of major themes**

*In part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following 3 interrelated themes:*

*Theme 1: Rage, rioting and failed dependency/ the baby biting the breast — the referendum was about anger of the neglect of U.K.*

The LP started with a female member commenting that she had been in Tesco's looking at empty shelves, and wondered if Brexit had arrived. She asked an employee who was filling shelves if it was Brexit related, the employee replied by saying her mother had told her that in hard times she used to wash her hair with fairy liquid. She mentioned that toilet rolls are imported and wondered about 'panic buying/ hoarding'. We are left wondering about what the impact will be — a catastrophic scenario?

A female member commented 'on the surface everything seems to be running normally', males in the group responded 'but underneath there is concern about knife crime, and about the far right'. The group discussion continued — how much is 'fake news' and stirred by the media? Is there a degree of threat of violence and intimidation from Brexiteers or is it a childish response — a temper tantrum? How might threats be followed through? The referendum vote was a protest.

A male member commented that he was recently consulting to a children's home. A meeting of the staff in the home collapsed into disorder with them shouting at each other. He felt shocked at the inherent hatred, the meeting broke up but later improved. It felt like his experience of the day after the 1980 Brixton riots when it was peaceful again. Is Brexit like this has? has it some good sides?

A female member spoke about an OPUS event on the weekend of the 1981 Brixton riots called 'Them and us in U.K. society'. Another female member who was living in Brixton at the time also remembered the euphoria in the aftermath and bought all the papers to read the accounts.

Brexit seems to be a catalyst for a lot of unresolved stuff. The narrative of a second referendum ignores that the first was a shambles, with a lot of fake information. A female member commented that if we don't care about manipulated misinformation then we don't care about democracy anyway. Brexiteers voted on years of inequality. The real issues were about lack of jobs, housing, education, poverty, deprivation and inequality. People were duped by the question asked. The slogan of 'take back control' created an illusion of potential change.

Our annihilation anxiety makes us bite at the breast. If we get too close to mother (EU) we fear we will get annihilated, but if we are too far away we fear starving to death-like the empty shelves in Tesco's. Brexit is an impossible solution and an insoluble problem.

## **Theme 2: Female vs male leadership, women set up in leadership roles to hold paradox.**

A female member commented that the Government have held the tension and anxiety for the nation. Despite holding it and re- holding it, there is still a leap into polarisation. Theresa May speaking to Jeremy Corbyn feels like a good move, but this collaboration but should have happened 2.5 years ago.

A male asked; What would have Churchill have done? Where are the strong leaders? The lack of support and undermining of May's deal feels at some level like a misogynistic attack, or are men simply getting women to do the dirty work? If the leader doesn't have a phallus are they regarded as an impotent leader? In the leadership election Andrea Leadsom attacked may for not having children. Theresa May is a product of an

adversarial system. The Scottish system seems less adversarial, but she has not approached the SNP or Welsh assembly.

A female member commented on research into female leadership; women seem to be selected into leadership when things are going into crisis mode — May has survived in role with great resilience despite her weaknesses. The group discussed 'how do we remain in Europe and stay out at the same time'? There was an acknowledgement that women are better at managing contradictions.

Other female leaders were mentioned; Jucinda Arden in NZ seems to offer a different kind of empathic leadership. Angela Merkel has handled the rage in Germany, she has worked in coalitions for a long time. Her acceptance of refugees is because of her ability to relate to people who are different. This has enabled Germans to accept their deeds of the past, and integrate with eastern Germany.

### **Theme 3: The U.K. holding and containing the division in/for Europe**

A male member commented at the silence at the start of the LP — we have started in silence, but Brexit is the elephant in the room. At the last LP Brexit was also the dominant theme.

We are giving the other EU countries source for amusement while we suffer Brexit fatigue.

A female member spoke of helping a lady who had become stuck in a toilet, she went to help and ended up stuck too. It felt like a metaphor for the Brexit impasse. A male member commented 'maybe the locks weren't made in Britain'.

A male member commented on the 'lack of talent and skill in government'. They end up with the least possible solution each time, e.g. the indicative votes, there were two rounds without a majority. A female member commented that she had been thinking about the current dynamic from a systems psychodynamics perspective — the 27 members of the EU currently feel very united and coherent against the U.K's. chaos — are we holding the chaos for the EU?

A female commented — 'how do we own our helplessness as citizens'. The parental figures (EU/UK) can't take care of us, we are the victims of a messy divorce.

A male member commented on how politics had become group dynamics through the 3 basic assumptions: We expect dependency on the good object of the EU, Brexiteers feel that the EU is a controlling super state and mobilise fight /flight — the EU becomes a bad object. May and Corbyn are then mobilised as a pairing to resolve the crisis.

We were reminded that Greece has been through this already.

### **Part 3: Analysis and hypothesis formation**

*Hypothesis 1: We retreat into our island identity as a social defence — we desire certainty to avoid complexity.*

#### **Analysis:**

The real issue is climate change and our survival. But the fantasy of Brexit is all about identity and certainty — little Englanders wanting to put the 'Great' back into Britain. We cannot tolerate a meaningful relationship with the EU and have a real union/marriage between two peoples. We fear the outcome of this intercourse will be mongrel children. This denies our own historic multi-ethnic mix.

We wish to 'avoid the other' in the EU and thereby avoid difference and diversity. We desire to remain independent, self-reliant on our own (and have more) resources. We engage in diversionary activities to avoid thinking about the anxiety of what refugees and immigration mean to us.

The hope of Brexit is that Britain will return to something it was before we joined the EU. A return to something purer for the older generation. Why didn't we talk about age! Younger people would vote to remain and because of the Brexit process Northern Ireland will eventually unite with Ireland, and Scotland will seek independence. The older generation fear the rise of more potent younger generation. We and the EU are an ageing population.

History is being re-written: 'we want history to be more stable like it used to be'.

Where does safety lie? In a large bloc like the EU are we safe? The very large number of people living impoverished lives in the UK will lead to the next marginalised and disenfranchised generation. Brexit avoids our own guilt about our lack of safety, it offers a desire for change — to remain alive and not be culturally annihilated — a mythological quest for eternal life.

We wish to return to being a small tribe. However we reminded ourselves of Bion's idea that 'man is a group animal at war with his own groupishness' — the fantasy of a return to the state you were before creates terrible anxiety.

#### **Hypothesis 2: Brexit as a (currently leaky but potential) container (see also theme 2)**

#### **Analysis:**

We are in a specific historical context — the end of the post war generation, 75 years on from WW2. We reminded ourselves that the EU was formed out of post war unity, but

Brexit makes us confront internal social divisions. The Irish border/ backstop issue reminds us that old divisions can be easily reignited.

### **Leaky containment**

A male member came back recently from Guyana — he commented on it being a small country with a colonial legacy that has led to a corrupted/ puppet government. It can feel quite dangerous there and yet people live through the instability and stay cheerful. They seem to have a capacity to not be dependent on government — compared to our dependency on expecting government to ‘sort it out.’

The ability to debate has become more difficult. There are massive projections and splits onto/between remainers and leavers — we unable to hold ambivalence.

### **Potential containment.**

Brexit was a necessity to resolve something that was lying under the surface. It has been fuelled by immigration which has seen the return of the colonised to the colonisers. We have gone full circle — we have to face and confront our guilt about our previous exploitation of other countries through the policy of ‘divide and rule’. We are hoping for a regression to the empire, or at least be able to trade with the commonwealth.

Maybe what Brexit provides is the necessary conditions to define our humanity through engaging with the tension and differentiation created by continuous argument.

**Convenor: John Diamond**