



An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

INTERNATIONAL LISTENING POST (DRAFT)

13th July 2022 - online

INTRODUCTION

This International Listening Post took place on Wednesday 13th July. The majority of the 15 participants was based in the UK, with one participating from Italy, one from China, and one from the Netherlands. The previous week, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, resigned from his post. A headline from *The Economist* (8th July 2022) noted, 'Mr Johnson was brought down by his own dishonesty'. Russia's war in Ukraine reached its 19th week. Inflation in the EU reached 8.6% (statistical office of the European Union, 1st July 2022), and 9.1% in the UK, its highest rate in 40 years (The Guardian, 22nd June 2022). Covid-19 cases in the UK were at c. 23 Million, with c. 180k deaths. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa will flee Sri Lanka this week on a military jet, amid mass protests over the island's economic crisis. The week of writing the report saw record breaking temperatures in the UK, as the South East hit 40 degrees Celsius.

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.

As the convenor welcomed the participants, and introduced the evening, prompted by two of the participants greeting each other in Italian, he stated that he was unsure as to whether or not the evening was a London listening post or an International listening post. A participant shared that – in a 'world gone crazy' they were nonetheless lucky enough to be finishing off a delicious ice cream, and that maybe we should all just have ice cream instead of meeting on such a balmy evening.

A group member noted it seemed impossible to know where to start. A sense of promise/hope which was evident in the ice cream chat, melted somewhat. A participant added that the tennis in Wimbledon was a great distraction to the world's woes, and to UK concerns over who would become the next UK Prime Minister, a role which will be chosen by the Conservative Party, and not voted on by the public.

Concerns over Sri Lanka's political future were raised, and also regarding where the world was headed; 'something's not quite right with the wheel, but we cannot stop it, or get off it, so what do we do with that?' A citizen raised a point made by Tony Blair (former UK PM), that we are going through a 'digital revolution', which will be as significant as the industrial revolution. Italy's decision to excavate more coalmines – the foundation of the industrial revolution - was called into question, as this will add to climate change, with much of the north of Italy in drought; the frustration of not being able to immediately tackle climate change was spoken to. Another participant noted that in his career on a submarine, you were always aware that nature is 'in charge' - we haven't always understood the complexity of the parameters within which climate change systems, and climate change targets, interact.

At this point, feelings in the group oscillated between moments of hope versus more prevalent feelings of despair and despondency; a citizen noted that we needed 'something far bigger than the digital revolution'. Technology's role in the climate crisis was referred to as a 'double-edged sword' - we 'do' things online, we try to change systems and politics, but what effect does this activity have?

A participant added that the UK Olympian Mo Farah released a documentary of his life on the BBC, telling his story for the first time about how he was trafficked to the UK as a child. A participant noted the case of a black woman having a baby abroad and being questioned on the baby's citizenship as she brought it home. Another participant added that this situation wouldn't have happened if the person in question were white - she wished to highlight the vulnerability of the

Jamaican baby and their mother, at the hands of UK Border Control. She expressed anger and disappointment at herself with not having previously drawn the authority's attention to a child who she believed were being trafficked. Expressing her frustration, she added 'what kind of good [citizen] does nothing (in the face of racism/witnessing child trafficking)?'

The participant noted this theme extended to challenging populism, climate change, and President Trump. A colleague expanded on this point, noting their frustration in consulting to systems which do not share their values; 'I think the ability of human beings to do nothing is absolutely astonishing'; 'in hiding from it all, I don't know what to say'.

An analogy was drawn between being lost 'down the rabbit hole' and watching tv drama; the group member tried to consciously shake a sense of anxiety-related flight/freeze. Another group member expanded on this theme, adding that the world is 'so fucked up right now'. As a response to a political system which commodifies citizens and dehumanises them, her friend copes by losing herself in the digital world. She added that 'as a black woman we've never been [humanised]'. With respect to the climate crisis, she expressed with a sense of anger and exasperation, 'are we going to cook alive?'. Her feelings of hopelessness and of failed dependency came through as she spoke of the next Conservative UK Prime Minister, stating, 'it will be another wing of the same bird'.

A participant spoke of powerlessness and of lost agency. He spoke about a sense of trauma in having attended a workshop on racism. He recalled a narrative from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981): Nazis kept cockroaches shielded from the sun in a box, but this was difficult as the lid on the 'seething mass of trouble' kept opening, and the cockroaches escaped. A participant reflected that cockroaches can survive a nuclear explosion, or a doomsday; therefore, they will become the next 'people' on the planet. We were reminded Katie Hopkins, a right-wing social media star, referred to asylum seekers arriving in the UK in boats from Calais as 'cockroaches'. The resilience demonstrated in making those nightmare journeys was commended. A group member illustrated how dung beetles were also resilient, noting 'a species is going to navigate ourselves forward'. Another member noted that we need to go 'super international' to get us out of 'this difficult place'.

A citizen reflected that a sense of hopelessness and overwhelm has left us feeling as though the world is now chaotic. This makes containment of our emotions impossible. A participant added that we need to think about our agency, and how our personal agency requires energy to become mobilised and accessed/leveraged – sometimes, this energy can come from rage. Sri Lanka showed us that agency and levers for change can also be fuelled by society wishing to reassess its dependency on political leaders.

A participant reflected on the scandals of the Johnson PM years, served by a political system which 'served the elite'. This was contrasted with the value of humility, as a participant noted the importance of 'staying with a decent amount of uncertainty [but absolute certainty is] a delusion indeed'.

Returning to Sri Lanka, the value of effective politicians was highlighted, and a feeling of longing for a sense of accountability prevailed. One group member urged another to become a politician, 'I mean, you would be so good.' A sense of hope was also expressed in the fact that the last UK Labour government introduced helpful initiatives such as minimum wage, which lasted through a Conservative government. The group seemed almost afraid to express hope for the return of reflective, responsible, accountable government, and the lost ability to reflect on learning from crisis; disappointment quickly gave way to feelings of crisis related to loss of meaning, and loss of competency in leaders.

A participant returned to the theme of authority from within, adding, 'can we rescue ourselves by trying to find some meaning within ourselves?' This was followed with a discussion of what can be done to avert climate crisis – adding, 'it's gonna be too late!' There was a call, to 'get back on the streets [to] try and smash the system as quickly as possible.' A group member shared how, as a climate change protester, he was defending himself in court, adding that it's important to 'break the fear barrier and stand up for ourselves'. A participant added that she felt humiliated by the interviewer when she, a woman not born in the UK, applied for universal credit after being a UK taxpayer for 17 years. A citizen added they were ashamed to be British.

ADDENDUM: In the 3rd part of the meeting, three groups offered feedback on themes and hypotheses from the second part. Fewer group feedback sessions (3 instead of 4/5) meant more time than usual was spent on exploring the themes shared in the plenary. The third group to feedback reported feeling concerned at the amount of time taken surrounding the discussion of themes by the second group. They were anxious that there would not be sufficient time for them to highlight their discussions, themes, and hypotheses – they were worried about being forgotten about.

A discussion also took place in the 3rd part, focusing on the revolutions which took place centuries ago. The Roman Empire was discussed in idealised terms. The Chinese and Taiwanese were described as 'blood brothers'. It was challenging to maintain the 3rd part boundary concerning no new material. The convening challenges perhaps reflected boundary challenges discussed in part one, e.g. the UK/EU, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

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

Three groups of five fed back to the plenary.

Theme 1: We are traumatised; we mourn the loss of accountable leaders and question the value of reflective citizenship. We wonder what is the point of thought and reflection, when so many challenges, such as climate change, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, require action?

Theme 2: The online world cocoons us, but - alongside the Covid-19 pandemic - it also contributes to our eroded sense of agency. We are lost in our rabbit holes and our echo chambers. It is hard to acknowledge our fear of the digital revolution; our submarine periscopes see neither above nor below the surface.

Theme 3: We struggle with our fantasy of 'the good old days'; unified nations/empires with clear and undisputed boundaries. However, we are disappointed and angry at elitism, ineffective political systems and the loss of agency. We ask where is our *Indiana Jones* – the archaeologist who finds the all-curing artefact?

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: Participants in the Part 3 listened to themes and hypotheses developed in Part 2 by the group convenors. The ask to the group was that we develop these hypotheses in Part 3. I offer the below two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:

As we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, we struggle to understand how personal and extra-personal boundaries have radically shifted and become newly permeable, e.g. the EU/UK boundary and wider worldwide boundaries. We feel helpless and hopeless at the chaos of the world and loss of containment. We fantasise about a 'Roman Empire-esque' societal container for anxiety, because we desire to 'go back' to a time when we didn't need to fear pandemic contagion, and other country's territorial ambitions, especially those of our blood-brother nations.

Hypothesis 2:

In the midst of a 'digital revolution', citizens are isolated and traumatised, and need to numb themselves to feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, uncertainty, fear, and shame, because the Covid-19 lockdown stole agency, and known modes of in-person protest, crushing our ability to hold ourselves and politicians to account. We strain to feel heard, and to see where our values find resonance in elitist politicians. The 'digital revolution' transition contributes to feelings of despondency - about how to stop climate change, how to re-build connections, and how to regain a sense of empowerment, accountability and humility.

Convenor: John Condon