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## Y bother? This generation inhabits a different world

Denis Muller  
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DON'T be too hard on generation Y.

Conventional, measured and uninterested in bold ideas? Yes, but who made them? A conservative and materialistic society, where the Prime Minister's stated ambition is to make people "relaxed and comfortable".

Yet although they are the product of John Howard's Australia, that does not mean that gen Y are Howard's children. A good number neither like nor trust the man.

Focus group research conducted by Irving Saulwick and me for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum in July found gen Y is fearless and flexible. The research was based on participants in eight groups, across cities and towns in four states, aged between 15 and 24.

Consider this: when Australia last experienced a recession, in 1990-91, the oldest members of gen Y were eight or nine and the youngest were in utero. Since then, Australia has enjoyed 15 years of sustained economic growth. No wonder they are comfortable.

Yet while many reveal little interest in ideas today, who knows how gen Y might react to adversity? It can be a powerful spur, and they have a lively sense of self-interest, just like their forebears down the ages. They are very concerned about the Howard Government's industrial relations changes, and this alone among the political issues of the day has the power to arouse them.

Whether it mobilises them is another matter. They don't trust trade unions, and the idea of collective action offends their powerful streak of individualism. Moreover, they have little sense of history.

To speak of such things as the Accord between government and unions, of the opening up of the Australian economy by deregulation, is to speak of matters as remote as the Napoleonic Wars.

Perhaps mobilisation in the old left-wing sense is unnecessary and they will just vote quietly.

Ironically, although lacking a sense of history, Gen Y have a place in history of their own: they are Australia's first truly globalised generation. Not for them the agonies of displacement and adaptation forced on their parents by the forces of globalisation and the information revolution. For gen Y the world has always been like it is now: change is the only constant, and adaptability is a prerequisite to survival. And the internet? Well, in 1994-95 when the internet became widely adapted in Australia for general use, the oldest gen Yers were 12 or 13. The youngest were not yet in school.

The contrast with their parents' generation could not be more stark. Six years ago Saulwick and I conducted a similar study among people in the workforce who were, for the most part,

in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

We found the effects of globalisation had profoundly undermined their sense of job security, fairness, and personal capacity to survive. Many had felt the lash of unemployment and were determined never to feel it again. Many held their jobs in fear that yet more restructuring and technological change could see them cast aside without warning.

Gen Y inhabits a different world. What's new about the unregulated global flow of labour and capital? People who want to work can always find it. Can't they?

But as in every generation, some in gen Y are already marginalised. Of the nine people in the group of unemployed we spoke to, one had a university degree and two had completed TAFE courses, but the rest had not completed secondary school.

In a group of carers - all young mothers - one had a university degree but all the others had left school in year 8 or 9.

Some now found themselves trapped in a vicious circle. They realised they were under-educated and therefore uncompetitive for anything other than menial jobs, but education would cost money. This was money they did not have and had no hope of obtaining because their earning capacity was limited by their lack of education.

There are other marginalised groups in Australian society whom we did not reach. These include people in indigenous communities, and people who belong to religious and ethnic minorities who are the object of current prejudice, such as Muslims and people of Middle Eastern origin.

For many in the robust middle of gen Y, indigenous people get too many favours from government. As for Muslims or people from the Middle East - and anywhere else for that matter - they should learn to speak English and be like "us".

In these matters, the attitudes of gen Y are no different from those of the generations which have gone before.

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