Stop berating young people
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Describing the youth of today as selfish is just prejudicial nonsense.

Certain ideas assume a persistent and mythic status. One is the idea that "youth today" are the most "difficult", "fickle" and "selfish" generation that has existed. It is a complaint that has been recycled through the centuries.

How can we understand the regurgitation of this tired old story of "young people today" as individualistic, materialistic, apolitical and socially uncommitted (James Norman, Opinion, 23/2)?

It is ill-founded prejudicial nonsense that not only does an injustice to contemporary young people, but also damages relations between older Australians and young citizens. It is pessimistic propaganda that reinforces the worst habits of mind, such as baseless and reckless generalisations.

Australians under 25, like any age group, are a diverse section of the population. "They" do not all share the same interests and values.

As even the most cursory survey of young people's lives indicates, "they" are not "all" selfish, without a sense of idealism and embedded into an ethos of debt, competition and rampant individualism.

The idea that growing up under the Howard Government has somehow operated to turn an entire generation into materialistic dupes incapable of critical thought ignores the rich diversity and social and political engagement of many young people's lives.

Norman's misrepresentations are due to his reliance on a very narrow idea of what constitutes "political" belief or action.

While some young people undoubtedly have little time for traditional forms of political activity, many are active citizens deeply committed to their various communities and to building a viable future.

Consider for example the mobilisation of young people around green issues or young people who join Young Liberals and Young Labor groups.

A less blinkered view of social or political engagement, one that recognises newer political styles and cultural citizenship, is needed to overcome this refusal to see the valuable contributions of so many young people.

Even if we did accept that some kind of causal relationship exists between a conservative federal government and the politics and values of a complete age group, how might we then explain the 1960s and early 1970s, which are renowned as the years of student politics and protests by those who were born and bred under the highly conservative Menzies government?

Growing up in an information age has led to many young people becoming well informed, globally oriented and willing to engage with others in important world events.

Many engage in a full range of political activities, from participation in more conventional ways - such as government-sponsored youth round tables, youth affairs councils and political party politics - to producing electronic publications that open up new public spaces for alternative voices, ideas and identities that contest many of the more conventional ways that we see and do things.

Many young people are instrumental in creating space that draws on longer-standing social movements
and youth cultures. Using the net is one way some groups have claimed space and created collective identities dedicated to specific political objectives.

Young people are typically at the forefront of creative endeavours and cultural styles, all of which are deeply political in the ways they challenge and shape aspects of our lives.

In Australia, geographic distance has often hindered the growth of grassroot networks. The reach and availability of the internet has largely removed the tyranny of distance.

It is time to stop berating young people. It is better to recognise the contribution many such people make to contemporary social, cultural and political debate and activism.

The time of censorial critics would be better spent reflecting on the quality of role models and the mixed messages being communicated to the young.

Too many young people are being excluded from full participation in the social life of our community.

It would be relevant and helpful to debate the ways young people are excluded from democratic access to political forums, and to debate the processes and mechanisms, including federal legislation, enabling employers to lawfully discriminate against them by denying them the economic and legal rights the rest of us now enjoy or take for granted.

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