GROWING FREEDOM

Young Australians are optimistic, aspirational, and remarkably entrepreneurial, writes Matthew Lesh.

Twenty-sixteen was a tumultuous year for global politics. The British people ignored their political leaders and voted to leave the European Union, while Americans elected Donald Trump. Australia also had its fair share of local revolts, with the continual power shift towards minor parties. Political elites have been left questioning the state of modern liberal democracy. A solid stream of social science research indicates a growing distrust in institutions.

To secure our fundamental principles and values we must understand what the rising generation thinks. That’s why the IPA has turned its focus on the youth of Australia in our new survey, Growing Freedom: Survey of Young Australians. The survey was conducted for the IPA by global market research company ResearchNow. We had 1006 respondents between the ages of 16 and 25. The survey was conducted online from 23 June 2016 to 1 July 2016 using web survey software to gather a nationally representative random sample, including a cross-section of gender and geography. As we see below, the results reveal that Australia’s young people are optimistic with an entrepreneurial spirit, and believe that we can help the economy by cutting taxes and government spending.
HOW DO YOUNG AUSTRALIANS FEEL ABOUT THESE IDEAS?

Respondents were asked: ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, rate how positively or negatively you feel about the following phrases.’


growing freedom

OPTIMISM AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Optimism is a key contributor to human flourishing. Being optimistic is strongly linked to better physical and mental health, persistence in educational efforts, higher incomes, and better relationships. And with continued technological progress and growing living standards, there is much to be optimistic about. Young Australians are aspirational and optimistic, with the clear majority not only positive about their future, but also about our nation. Indeed, 69 per cent expect to have a better standard of living in 10 years’ time.

The greatest hope for the future is seen to be human rights (35 per cent), followed by technological advances (24 per cent), protection of the environment (20 per cent), and economic growth (16 per cent).

THE SIGNS OF APATHY TOWARDS DEMOCRACY SHOW THAT THESE IDEAS MUST BE CONTINUALLY ELEVATED, DEBATED, AND TAUGHT TO YOUNG AUSTRALIANS, WHO ARE RELATIVELY MORE ATTRACTIONED TO UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS ARE MORE EXCITING, WHILE MEN ARE HOPEFUL ABOUT DIFFERENT FUTURE MATERIALS.

Young Australian men and women are hopeful about different possibilities. For women, human rights are more exciting, while men are more excited by technological advances. In this way, we can understand the different educational choices by men, who undertake engineering and information technology courses in higher numbers, compared to women, who are relatively more attracted to humanities and law courses.

Sitting alongside this optimism is a remarkable entrepreneurial spirit. The majority of young Australians (60 per cent) are interested in starting their own business one day, which represents an even stronger sense of entrepreneurialism than their American counterparts (55 per cent). Also, a much higher number of Americans rule out the idea of starting a business altogether (43 per cent compared to 23 per cent in Australia), according to Reason’s Millennial Survey.

AUSTRALIAN CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Australia has achieved an extraordinary 25 years without recession and has one of the highest gross domestic product per capita in the world, while enjoying a relatively low level of unemployment. Nevertheless, there are serious threats to our economic prosperity. Our growth is stagnating, and Australia’s global competitiveness falls in the bottom half of the world.

This news is particularly disconcerting for young Australians, whose unemployment rate (more than 12 per cent) is more than double the overall rate. Our youth not only understand Australia’s material and ideological challenges—debt and deficit, housing affordability and terrorism and war—but have beliefs on how those problems are solved.

Despite higher spending by the Australian Government, most young Australians believe that cutting both government spending and taxes would benefit the economy. Unfortunately, there is less confidence that reducing regulation or reducing the size of government would help.

Australia’s gross national debt will surpass $500 billion this financial year. Our debt growth rate is among the fastest in the world, threatening our AAA credit rating. This is particularly concerning for young Australians, who will inevitably be shackled with higher taxes and fewer services to pay back today’s borrowing.

Young Australians are aware of the nation’s debt problems, but they are split on how soon it must be addressed. That is, while more than 70 per cent of young Australians believe that Federal Government debt and deficit is a major problem, only 40 per cent believe it should be addressed today. Almost a third would leave this task to the future, when the economy is better.

LANGUAGE AND DEMOCRACY

 Asking young Australians to rate, on a scale from one to 10, how positively disposed they were to a variety of political terms shows one thing: language matters. On average, young Australians are most positively disposed towards values concepts such as human rights, opportunity and freedom. Other terms, such as human flourishing, liberty and economic freedom received strong responses. But technical or ideological labels rate poorly, including 49 per cent of young Australians ranking ‘communism’ at four or below.

Nevertheless, young Australians do not appear to be particularly ideologically passionate, with 51 per cent neither agreeing or disagreeing with the notion that the capitalist free market system works better than the socialist system. Perhaps this is a sign that the next generation is open to persuasion. Reassuringly, socialism appeals only to a minority.

A lack of ideological passion could be connected with the continued evidence that young Australians view democracy as less important than do their elders. Just 31 per cent of young Australians rated the importance of living in a democracy as completely important. This falls well behind the 59 per cent of all Australians who gave an answer of 10 out of 10 in the last World Values Survey. But there are positive signs for democracy, with 83 per cent answering six out of 10 or above (the average across all the responses was 7.9 out of 10). Again, this compares unfavourably to the overall Australian average of 8.6. However, it is consistent with survey findings from other western democracies, including the United Kingdom and the United States, which suggest young people have a lesser view of the importance of democracy than their elders.

What is the most important element of living in democracy? Three in four believe the most important aspect is human rights, while only 17 per cent said it was the chance to vote. The importance that young Australians ascribe to the concept of human rights highlights the need to ensure the concept is succinctly and meaningfully defined in public debates. Traditionally rights were perceived to be what social and political theorist Isaiah Berlin defined as ‘negative’ liberty — protection from government action. Modern human rights discourse, however, incorporates ‘positive’ liberty, that is, economic and social rights, group rights,
humanitarian intervention and non-discrimination. By expanding the concept so widely, rights often amount to mere ‘wants’.  In a particularly worrying sign, young Australians have limited conceptualisation of freedom of speech. The survey found that 84 per cent believed people should be able to say things that criticise government policies, while just 39 per cent believe that people should be able to make statements that are offensive to their religion or beliefs, and 36 per cent believe that people should be able to make offensive statements about minority groups. This is concerning because freedom of speech underpins a free, liberal, and democratic society.

Some level of income redistribution is supported by young Australians, with 64 per cent believing the role of government includes reducing the gap between high income and low income earners. This finding is similar to the general Australian disposition towards government redistribution found by previous surveys. Most young Australians support larger government with higher taxes providing more services, over smaller government and fewer services. However, 52 per cent of those who have entered the workforce support smaller government, fewer services, and low taxes. This indicates a comforting maturing of views.

A McKinsey Global Institute report last year found that household incomes in developed countries, including Australia, are not growing as quickly as they did in previous generations, potentially leaving young people worse off than their parents. These material concerns are apparent to young Australians. According to the survey, 49 per cent believe that they will be worse off than their parents’ generation, 56 per cent are doubtful that they will be able to own their own home within the next decade and 60 per cent believe that they will face higher taxes in the future. Just 17 per cent believe that government will be smaller.

Nevertheless, when asked directly about their biggest fear, the most prominent responses related to physical security. About a third nominated terrorism and 18 per cent war as their biggest fear, with 23 per cent opting for climate change and 20 per cent for economic collapse.

Growing Freedom reminds us that there is hope for the future, offering a variety of opportunities to engage with young people about the issues that matter to them. We have found that young people do not find socialism or communism particularly appealing, that they comprehend the danger of debt and deficit, and that they understand that cutting taxes and government spending would help the economy.

More than any time in recent history the fundamental values of Western Civilisation, the ideas and institutions that have made us free and prosperous, are largely untaught in our schools and universities, and unacknowledged in our public debate. The signs of apathy towards democracy and freedom of speech should teach us one thing: these ideas must be continually elevated, debated, and taught to young Australians.

The full results from Growing Freedom are available at www.ipa.org.au