

Australia: Murdoch columnist blames young people for inability to purchase homes

Oscar Grenfell
29 October 2016

A column in the *Weekend Australian* on October 15, which implied that young people could not afford their own homes because of lifestyle excesses and lavish expenditure, has met with widespread indignation and anger.

Bernard Salt, a social commentator at the Murdoch flagship, wrote that he had observed the younger generation buying expensive “smashed avocado on toast” at cafes. As part of a broader denunciation of “hipster cafes,” Salt declared that he had “seen young people order smashed avocado with crumbled feta on five-grain toasted bread at \$22 a pop and more.”

The columnist continued, “I can afford to eat this for lunch because I am middle-aged and have raised my family. But how can young people afford to eat like this? Shouldn't they be economising by eating at home? How often are they eating out? Twenty-two dollars several times a week could go towards a deposit on a house.”

Salt's article, one of many directed against the supposedly unrealistic expectations of the younger generation, prompted an immediate reaction.

One typical comment on Twitter stated, “I'm real good at saving. Paid off uni, eat out once a month. Bare minimum expenses. Definitely no smashed avocado. Where's my house?” Another said, “I go out for breakfast because even if I didn't I couldn't come close to a house deposit. So just shut up and take my rent money.” One user commented, “Given I'm allergic to avocado and cannot enjoy smashed avo lunches it is particularly galling that I'm not a property mogul already.”

Some media outlets pointed to the absurdity of Salt's argument. The *Guardian* noted that a deposit for a median-priced home in Sydney is \$204,000, at 20 percent of the value of the dwelling. That would be the equivalent of 9,921 servings of “smashed avocado on toast” at \$22, or more than 56,000 take-away coffees. It is 3.8 times the median annual income for a full time job.

Salt responded to the furore by penning another column claiming that his piece was satirical, and that the anger was yet another example of a generational miscommunication. Whatever the intentions behind the comment, however, it dovetails with several that he has written, arguing that young people need to “toughen up” and realise that, amid a deepening economic crisis, they need to dramatically lower their expectations.

One typical article declared that the “federation generation,” born in the 1890s, “makes you all look soft.” That generation, Salt wrote, was one of “‘can-do’ blokes,” who bore the hardships of

two world wars, the great depression, poverty and homelessness. In other words, young people today have nothing to complain about and should be grateful for their lot.

An article in July, headlined “Time for the me generation to accept hardship” was more explicit. In it, Salt declared that “Modern consumer behaviour is underpinned by the concept of entitlement.” He wrote that the mentality of young people was: “I am entitled to an affordable house perfectly furnished in a desirable suburb and if I am not provided with this then it is not my fault it is the fault of society.”

Underlying Salt's argument, was a concern that the legitimate aspirations of young people, for a decent, interesting life, are incompatible with the demands of the corporate and financial elite for social austerity, which he supports. “In a fearful world of shrinking opportunity, an indulged and entitled people unused to hardship are sure to look askance at who has more and insist they pay more,” the columnist wrote. He concluded by calling on “politicians and business leadership” to “galvanise a disparate and self-focused community so that we see merit, perhaps even take pride in, the idea of subjugating individual wants and desires for the greater good.”

Contrary to Salt's claims, life for the vast majority of young people today is a constant and increasingly fraught struggle. They are part of the first generation in recent history that will suffer a lower standard of living than that of their parents. Their lives are dominated by myriad social problems, including rising poverty, unemployment, homelessness and mental health issues, stemming from capitalism, a social order that offers them no future. Young people, Salt argues, must get used to the fact that they will never own a home, have a decent job with a living wage or any number of the other necessities of life in a technologically complex modern society.

Adelle, a 29 year-old artist, who works in a bookshop one day a week, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Salt's article had prompted lively discussions among her peers. She commented, “Salt has no compassion for the economic reality of today's younger generation. Most of the people I associate with are living on casual wages in very hand to mouth circumstances where it's just week to week living without any real sense of security.”

She noted, “My existence is so precarious. There is far less job security than there was even ten years ago. You have to have a master's degree to land any kind of professional job and there's no trust left in terms of your life skills.”

Commenting on Salt's argument, she noted a broader "sense of hostility and contempt towards the younger generation for perhaps not sharing the same values as those before. But the environment has shifted so much that we can't share those values when we don't have what generations before us had—things like free education, job security, a more trusting job environment."

She continued, "It's not really about houses, it's about a sense of security, and when you don't have any security or any stable future you're stuck in a situation where when you have money, you need to belong to society on some level. Sometimes it's in the form of a quick fix, a participation in "mainstream excessive culture"—eating well for instance. It's served to you as a package of stability, of life wealth, it's a kind of mirage that we're maybe living to fill a void."

The housing situation, to which Salt pointed, is just the starkest expression of the social reality that faces young people. An ongoing boom in the real-estate sector, fuelled by government policies, including low interest rates and speculative investment, has seen housing prices soar across Australia. Median house prices in Sydney are at a record \$1.06 million and in Melbourne, the figure stands at over \$773,000; they have risen by 65 percent and 45 percent respectively, since 2012.

Rates of home-ownership among young people are at record lows. A study released by the Melbourne Institute in August found that home-ownership in the 25- to 34-year-old age bracket fell from 39 percent in 2002 to 29 percent in 2014. In 1981, more than 61 percent of under-35s owned their own home. Now, almost 30 percent in that age group are forced to live with their parents. Many young people have to deal with a life of abject misery on the streets. Figures from the Salvation Army show that at least 36,000 young people are homeless on any given night. Anecdotal reports indicate that many more live a precarious existence of couch-surfing and staying with friends.

Those who do buy a home are saddled with an average mortgage of \$308,000, up from \$81,000 in 1981.

Between 2010 and 2015, the length of time it took for a two-income household, on average full-time wages, to save a median house deposit, rose from 5.8 to 7.9 years.

Most young people, however, are shut-out of full-time employment. The rate of casual work among employed young has grown from 34 percent in 1991, to around 50 percent this year. More than 20 percent of young people in the job market are classified as "underemployed."

Last August, a survey of 500 18- to 24-year-olds found that over 50 percent said they were not being paid at the award rate, 56 percent said they had not received the required training and the bulk of respondents said they were poorly treated by management.

With more jobseekers than placements available, most young people have no choice but to accept these conditions. According to figures from the ABS in August, there was an average of almost 20 job seekers for every job on offer. Adelle, who spoke to the WSWS, applied for six jobs last month. Many youth send out hundreds of resumes, without receiving so much as a reply.

Among the unemployed, poverty rates are endemic. They stand at 55 percent for people on Newstart, which provides just \$38 a day. Youth allowance, which is eligible to people under 24,

including full-time students, attracts a poverty rate of 51.8 percent, up more than a percent over the last year. Poverty rates are measured as less than 50 percent of median income. For a single adult, the figure is an income of just \$343 per week after housing costs.

The growing uncertainties of daily life for young people have created an epidemic of mental health problems. Almost a quarter of youth report having dealt with mental health issues. The charity organisation, Headspace, reported this month that half of those suffering wait six months or more before seeking professional assistance. Almost 50 percent said that finances were an issue in seeking treatment.

Salt's column, and others like it, serve to justify the ideological rationale for further government-led attacks against the youth, which will only exacerbate the crisis they confront. The Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull has launched a new offensive against welfare, with senior ministers denouncing a "welfare mentality" and declaring they will force thousands off government benefits. Australia already has one of the most punitive welfare systems in the world, with unemployed jobseekers often dragooned into "work for the dole" programs in order to receive their meagre benefits.

Labor and the Greens have at times sought to posture as opponents of this agenda, falsely ascribing it to "conservative" ideology. Greens treasury spokesman, Peter Whish-Wilson took an avocado to a Senate estimates hearing last week and declared "we've got to help the kids." The same Whish-Wilson, a former Wall Street banker, declared upon being elected to parliament in 2013 that weekend penalty rates (requiring weekend work to attract a higher pay rate) were "outdated" and an "Anglo-Saxon cultural thing."

Moreover, Julia Gillard's Greens-backed Labor government carried out some of the deepest attacks to healthcare, welfare and social spending in decades. And now, Labor has outlined an agreement with the Turnbull government for another \$6.3 billion in spending cuts, targeting the most vulnerable, including university students, migrants, low-income families and the unemployed.

The increasingly dire plight of young people points to the need for an alternative political perspective, oriented towards the fight for the complete reorganisation of society to meet social need, not private profit: that is, the fight for socialism. In its own way, the furore over Salt's comment points to growing disaffection among young people with the status quo, and a restiveness that presages major social and political struggles.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact