



# Contributing or Consuming?

Those of us aged 50 -70 years are the generation born on the heels of World War II, to parents who were full of optimism for a peaceful and prosperous world. After the rations and restrictions of the war years, they were determined that we should have none, and so our generation, the Boomers, grew up as the most indulged group yet.

Freedom and independence were our childhood themes, as, after chores were done, we headed out on bicycles (with no helmets), free to explore and have fun, so long as we were home for dinner. We climbed trees, built huts, and played. All without Mum or Dad looking over our shoulders. As with so many of life's ironies, this reversed when we became parents and hovered over our children like helicopters.

Youth and young adulthood with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll emphasised images of hedonism for some, and confirmed our generation's growing focus on self. While that was often regarded as selfish, self-centred and self-absorbed, it also translated into self-development, self-determination, and a quest for self-fulfilment.

As we grew, our expectation of freedom extended to other areas of lifestyle and work choices. Jobs were readily available to the 'Lucky' generation, and tertiary education easily accessible to all, for the first time. Home ownership was the norm, and the accompanying debt was simply part of the package.

Boomers came of age in a time of increasing consumerism. The mass production of goods plus plentiful jobs equalled spending power that encouraged us to fill our new homes with stuff we couldn't always afford. Credit cards became our new ally, and conspicuous consumption a growing trend. Boomers, as individuals, worked hard and fought hard for what we believed in, and the growing liberalism echoed in our support for the rights movements. Social justice was the catchcry for the civic-minded as we sought to redress past injustices.

Were these the lives of all boomers? Of course not. Any group of people that spans two decades of change, across many parts of the world, will have radically diverse experiences. Boomers were just the next generation evolving to meet their circumstances.

Yet, however individual cultures responded, generational themes in Western cultures bear strong similarities. Social and economic influences made boomers wealthier and healthier, better educated and focused optimistically on themselves and their future.

As this large demographic bulge is heading into the second half of life, there have been widespread predictions ranging from the greying financial burden of a large, unproductive sector of the community, to excitement that boomers with a social conscience may have more time to work on solutions to the world's problems. So, are we contributors or consumers?

Researchers, Huber & Skidmore (2003) suggested that boomers in old age will likely fall into one of three groups:

**The Selfish Generation:** A generation of individualists and pioneers of the consumer society, (uniting) around the pursuit of their own fulfilment and the enjoyment of their accumulated wealth... with little regard for the... less well-off or future generations.

**The Civic Defenders:** A generation of liberal activists... against the erosion of the public realm... creating the conditions for radical and progressive politics.

**The Invisible Elders:** A fragmented generation, failing to coalesce, with little or no influence... splintering into sub-groups absorbed into other currents of social change.

Huber and Skidmore paint an interesting picture of the diversity of a generation, as boomers age with the same determinations that shaped their earlier lives.

While they make valid points, on first consideration I was convinced that the selfish and invisible boomers were far outnumbered by the civic-minded ones who cared for the world. However, recent world events have made me wonder if I'm only seeing what I expect to see.

Anecdotally, I've certainly observed instances of all three groups.

In South-East Asia, for example, there are many foreign, retired boomers who live cheaply in resorts or similar accommodation, spending their days by the pool or chatting in local bars. It's an easy, relaxed way of life, interrupted only by occasional visa renewal runs home.



Their impact on the local community is minimal and conversation seems to revolve around the world at a distance. When I've asked about the appeal of the lifestyle, several have told me that they feel they've worked hard, paid their dues and now it's their turn to take it easy, in whatever way they choose.

For boomers who have been lifelong volunteers and activists, the idea of stepping back from civic duty is unthinkable. Many of my friends and colleagues fall into these groups, and their ongoing desire to change the world seems to take one of two paths. Some activists have told me that age has offered more time to focus their energies on what matters most, without the interruptions of work or family commitments. Others have taken on mentoring roles, happily passing the torch on to the next generations. In both cases, the passion for social justice remains strong.

The third group of invisible boomers appeared to me on a long, four-day train journey across Canada. Sitting with a woman who was newly retired from teaching, I asked about her plans. "I've no idea," she said, "teaching was my work and my life. There was nothing else. I've been dreading this time for years

and now it's here, and I'm just treading water until something comes along." And with that, she asked me what I thought she should do. When I declined to offer suggestions, she said, "Well, that's very frustrating." When I asked if she really wanted to be told what to do, she said, "Not really, but everyone else has an opinion, so I thought I may as well ask you". With limited resources and no real interests, beyond the work she had left, she was afraid of fading into insignificance.

So, what's your path? Are you choosing to go quietly in hard earned comfort? Or are you continuing to make a ruckus for a better world? It is, after all, a luxury of choice, so spend it well. \*

\*Excerpt from 'A Bold Life: How Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty.' Author, Jenny Magee works with women to make the most of the second half of their lives. If you'd like to talk with Jenny about being Bold, email:

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