

“Different is not deficient”. Nor is the official view always right.

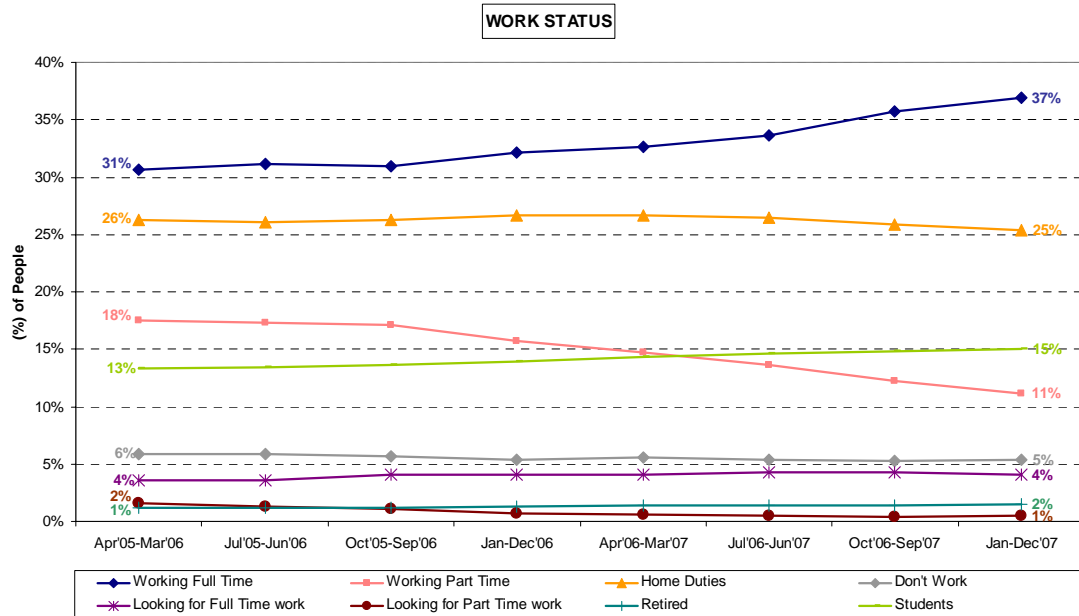
Nursing a sprained back and conscious of the need to meet the deadline for this weekly column, I decided to take time out to tune into the keynote speech of Rev. Jeremiah Wright at the annual dinner of the NAACP, in Detroit Sunday evening. I am not religious but respect all faiths and those who practice theirs. In watching the speech “live” on television, my purpose was to come to my own conclusions about the man who has both inspired and damaged Barack Obama’s bid for the Oval Office. Half an hour later, I concluded that he was truly inspiring, a visionary, a man of faith not just his brand of Christianity. For me, his message was simple. People of different backgrounds are different for cultural reasons; no one is superior or inferior, better or worse by dint of birth. We just need to recognise that, learn to get along and work to right wrongs.

But for those of you who are interested, read the analysis that will follow in the days and weeks ahead. Hear the sound bytes taken out of context, the distortion of his message. Criticism will be construed as hate, differences of opinion will be translated into weaknesses of intellect. Inevitably, race and religion will creep in. Depending on what you’re reading or watching, you will form an opinion that could be far away from the truth as it was uttered.

When you stop to think about it, you’ll recognise that you too nurse several “facts” and “beliefs” that you may indeed wish to question. A few weeks ago, I drew attention to the popular view that there are 100 million “cellular subscribers” in Indonesia while the truth is closer to half that number. Today, let me draw attention to the critical issue of unemployment in Indonesia. Depending on who you speak with, there are between 10 and 20 million people unemployed in this country today. BPS data will state about 12 million. But the term “unemployment” is defined in the dictionary as the state of an individual looking for a paying job but not having one. By that definition there at best only 7 million people currently unemployed.

That 7 million comprises 4% of the potential workforce “looking for full-time work” and 1 per cent “looking for part-time work”. In most countries this is good news, certainly from a political perspective. Suddenly, the unemployment problem is almost half the size it is perceived to be. Instead of being greeted with relief, these numbers will be dispensed with a bureaucratic flick of the finger. Discussions will ensue about “classifications” and “terminology”. Questions will be asked whether Roy Morgan Research definitions include “open category” and other such arguments, completely ignoring the common-sense reality that you cannot be unemployed if you aren’t actively looking for a job.

At any point in time, about 6 per cent of the potential workforce “Don’t work”. That translates to about 9 million people, comprising students contemplating their future as well as girls who will work at home biding their time to get married and raise their own family. Then there are the disabled and those who simply choose not to work but live off others. We often forget the fact that in a conservative culture, 26 per cent of the potential workforce is housewives. Unleash that underlying demand and there would be an employment crisis even bigger than the official view of 10.6 per cent unemployment in the country.



Let me hasten to add that 7 million unemployed is a very large number, regardless of percentages. It is cause for concern, grief and even shame. What is even more worrying is that the small businesses that bankers prefer to call “micro-businesses”, are on the decline. The significant growth in full-time employment during the second half of 2008, and the decline in demand for part-time employment is driven by the essential need to pay for the increased cost of living, particularly food prices. Almost all of the growth in new jobs is from “unskilled or semi-skilled workers”. That almost inevitably means people more people are working harder for the most meagre of wages, given jobs by kind benefactors on the one hand and mean exploiters on the other. In that sense, underemployment and low wages remain a heavy burden of society.

For those involved in the marketing of mass consumer products and services, therein lies the explanation for growth last year. More people working and more people working harder for less. The big question in their minds will be “for how long can this continue”. In Australia, the opposite is true. Contrary to the people’s opinion as measured by Roy Morgan Research, a strong economy is being punished with higher interest rates, because the official view of almost full-employment and the risk of inflation is far from the reality on the ground. For continuing coverage of these key questions, watch this column for the results as they unfold. In the meantime, all ideas and efforts that help create new businesses, new jobs, and better wages will all help enlarge a consumer economy for the common good of Indonesia.

These conclusions are based on Roy Morgan Single Source, the country’s largest syndicated survey with over 27,000 Indonesian respondents annually, projected to reflect almost 90% of the population over the age of 14. That is a universe of 140 million people. The results are updated every 90 days. The opinions expressed are my own.

The writer can be contacted at Debnath.Guharoy@roymorgan.com