‘A fair go’ in public policy

David Bromell

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Abstract

In the context of the 2013 retirement income review (CFLRI, 2013), Kathryn Maloney and Malcolm Menzies from the Commission for Financial Literacy and Retirement Income put the question to me: what does ‘a fair go’ mean in public policy? I mentioned this in a chance conversation with Colin James, who suggested tackling the question in an active, verbal sense (‘a fair go’), rather than attempting to elaborate on ‘fairness’ as an abstract noun. Consequently, this paper does not propose ‘a theory of fairness’ as a proxy for, say, a theory of distributive justice, or a theory of social justice, even a non-ideal theory of justice (cf. Arvan, 2014; Simmons, 2010). My aim is more modest: to provide a framework for public reasoning in contexts where there is argument across the political spectrum about whether a public policy gives people who are affected by it ‘a fair go’.
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Every public policy – not just health policy – has the potential to affect human health and wellbeing. For example public transport infrastructure investments like the light rail project in the ACT matter for health. Because socially disadvantaged Australians are more reliant on public transport, urban planning decisions that don’t take their needs into account weigh heavier on them. We also hope that policymakers in all sectors will use our research to inform policy development so that we can start giving all Australians a fair go at health equity. It may just be the shot in the arm that millions of Australians desperately need.

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