
NON-AGENDA

With the view of causing an increase to take place in the mass of national wealth, or with a view to increase of the means either of subsistence or enjoyment, without some special reason, the general rule is, that nothing ought to be done or attempted by government. The motto, or watchword of government, on these occasions, ought to be — Be quiet...Whatever measures, therefore, cannot be justified as exceptions to that rule, may be considered as *non-agenda* on the part of government.

—Jeremy Bentham (c.1801)

Intergenerational Equity in an Ageing Society

Janna Thompson

Ageing populations in many developed countries have heightened concerns about the growing costs to governments and taxpayers of funding pensions and medical benefits for the aged. There is no agreement among policy makers and economists about the seriousness of this concern. The Commonwealth Government's *Intergenerational Report* (2002) takes the view that an ageing population will put intolerable fiscal strain on future governments unless policies are adopted to alleviate the problem. Kelly and Harding (2004) argue that the problem is aggravated by the fact that most baby boomers have not saved sufficiently for retirement. On the other hand, McDonald (2004) thinks that financing the costs associated with an ageing population will not be a serious burden to an increasingly wealthy Australian population, and Day and Dowrick (2004) argue that increased productivity of a workforce with higher educational attainments will offset problems caused by a demographic change.

Intersecting these discussions about the fiscal and economic effects of demographic change is a debate about intergenerational equity. The *Intergenerational Report* holds that it would be unfair for ageing generations to impose a higher tax burden on younger generations (2002:1). McDonald, on the other hand, contends that it would not be unfair to require future taxpayers to support a large cohort of elderly people, or for present generations to incur government debts that future people must pay. Though discussions of intergenerational equity are motivated by the fear that an ageing population will be burdensome, the views themselves are, to some extent, independent of economic projections. If it is unfair for the young to have to shoulder the burdens of a large

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cohort of ageing people, then the inequity exists whether future taxpayers are rich or poor. If equity requires working generations to support the elderly, then the young ought to support them even when this becomes burdensome. The purpose of this essay is to focus on the issue of intergenerational equity: to present ideas about equity that are widely accepted by philosophers and citizens of liberal democratic societies and to discuss their implications for relations between the generations — especially their implications for the debate about the ageing society.

Meaning of Intergenerational Equity

Intergenerational equity, broadly speaking, has to do with how social institutions and policies ought to distribute benefits and burdens, risks and opportunities between the generations. An equitable distribution is one that people can regard as fair. However, ‘generation’, and thus ‘intergenerational equity’, have two distinct, though related, meanings. A generation can be understood as an age group: consisting of the old or the young. In the light of this meaning, intergenerational equity is concerned with how resources should be distributed among different age groups of a society and how responsibilities for meeting the special needs of people in these groups should be assigned. A view of intergenerational equity, so understood, is part of a more extensive theory that concerns itself with the proper distribution of resources, rights, burdens, benefits, and responsibilities among people of a society. Some of the issues raised by demographic change are about equity between age groups. Those who respond to the problem of an ageing population by insisting that people ought to be required to save for their retirement, stay longer in the workforce, or in other ways shoulder the burdens of their old age are putting forward a view about how responsibilities for meeting the needs of an age group should be assigned. More generally, the idea that individuals should pay for the benefits they receive — an idea of equity that is implicit in the *Intergenerational Report* — is a view about the proper distribution of costs and benefits among individuals and groups, whenever they happen to exist.

A generation can also be a birth cohort — that is, a group of people who share proximate birth dates. In the course of time, individuals move out of one age group and into another while remaining members of the same birth cohort. Intergenerational equity, as the proper distribution of benefits and burdens among birth cohorts, is concerned with justice over time: above all, with the responsibilities of older birth cohorts for the future wellbeing of those who are young or not yet born. The *Intergenerational Report* with its emphasis on ‘fiscal sustainability’ is centrally concerned with this aspect of intergenerational justice — the need to ensure that activities of present people do not compromise the wellbeing of people of future generations.

Since both intergenerational equity as equity between age groups and intergenerational equity as equity between birth cohorts play a role in debates about how to respond to demographic change, the following sections will deal

with each in turn. Theories of equity that focus on distribution of resources among contemporaries (that is, presently existing citizens) have received the most attention from philosophers and others concerned with justice. The discussion, therefore, begins with an examination of some of their views and will consider how they bear on the issues with which policymakers are concerned. It will be followed by a consideration of whether their ideas about equity can also be applied to relationships between birth cohorts. Finally, some of the resulting problems and some of the factors that influence views about how the problems should be solved are identified.

Equity Among Age Groups

Equity is a contested concept. There is no general agreement among philosophers or citizens of liberal democratic states about what counts as a fair, and thus an equitable, distribution of resources. Egalitarians have traditionally insisted that the only equitable distribution is an equal one: that individuals of a society should have more or less equal shares of socially produced resources. Others think that there is nothing inequitable about a society that allows individuals to reap rewards through the exercise of their talents, providing that all citizens have an equal opportunity to acquire and exercise talents. They believe that opportunities, not outcomes, should be equal. Some citizens think that inherited wealth is inequitable; others believe that an equitable society should allow individuals the freedom to use and dispose of their wealth as they please. Some people think of their society as providing social insurance schemes from which individuals should derive a benefit equal to what they put in. Others think that an equitable society should support those in need regardless of the size of their contributions, and that wealthy citizens ought to expect to contribute more.

The latter is the opinion of the philosopher John Rawls (1972) who, in his influential account of justice, argues that equity, as an aspect of justice, is best understood as the consensus that would arise in an 'original position' where people of a society are required to reach a conclusion about principles of justice for their society.

Rawls assumes that citizens of a liberal democracy have a 'sense of fairness' — that they possess what is described in the literature of economics as 'self centred inequity aversion' (McDonald, 2005) — and the purpose of his exercise is to determine the principles that they would articulate starting from this basis. He imagines that they make their agreement behind a 'veil of ignorance' where they do not know their class, race, religion, ethnic background, gender, or idea of the good. Lacking knowledge about their own interests, they would be forced to be impartial, and Rawls argues that in making the social contract they would agree to a principle of equity requiring that basic resources of their society be distributed so that inequalities benefit the least well off groups.

In Rawls' theory, equity does not mean equal division of resources, but his idea of equity is, in spirit, egalitarian. He believes that equity requires an equal division of social resources except when an unequal division, by increasing social

wealth, would give the least well off people benefits greater than they would receive if the inequalities did not exist.

Despite its claim to impartiality, Rawls' egalitarian view of equity has been challenged by those who think that it is unfair to require legitimate owners of resources to contribute to the wellbeing of others (Nozick, 1974); and also by those who believe that in an equitable society, the talents and efforts of citizens should play a role in determining how resources should be distributed (Sher, 1987). These challenges reflect the disagreements among citizens, referred to above, about the meaning and requirements of equity.

Experimental data on equity

According to Fishkin (1983), disagreements about equity are inevitable because fundamental values of a liberal society are in tension with each other and cannot be perfectly reconciled. The value of liberty, particularly the liberty of individuals to use their resources to advance the interests of themselves and their families, tends to come into conflict with the value of equality, as expressed in Rawls' theory of justice and in the views of more radical egalitarians. Ideals of liberty and equality are in turn in tension with the belief held by many people that individuals should be rewarded according to their contributions or effort, providing that opportunities are equal. The view of equity that an individual favours depends on the order of priority he or she gives to these values. Since people have different priorities, they will often disagree about particular policies.

However, this explanation of the disagreements that occur among philosophers and non-philosophers allows that there can be a considerable amount of agreement among people of a society about some matters. When social theorists and psychologists conducted experiments that replicated, so far as practical, Rawls' original position, they found that groups of people, given the task of arriving at a view about distributive justice for an imagined society in which their place was undetermined, generally managed to reach an agreement (Frohlich and Oppenheimer, 1992). In most cases they came to the conclusion that an equitable society would be one in which average income was as high as possible, but where a minimum income, acting as a floor constraint on inequality, would be guaranteed to all. Much more disagreement within the groups occurred over the question of how large the minimum income should be. In their discussions, the members of the groups made it clear that they thought that the basic needs of members of a society should be satisfied, but that it was fair for people to obtain extra benefits through exercise of their talents or by being the beneficiaries of those who had exercised their talents in past generations, providing opportunities were equal.

The data from these experiments indicate several important facts about the way in which many citizens of liberal democracies think about equity. In forming their view, individuals accommodate the conflicting values of a liberal society. They do not adhere to one and reject the others. The subjects of the experiments did not favour Rawls' egalitarian view of how resources should be distributed.

Still less did they favour the views of more radical egalitarians. The reasons they gave for the conclusion they reached made it clear that they believed that merit and liberty should figure in a conception of an equitable society. But they did endorse the value of equality — up to a point. They insisted that all citizens should have resources sufficient to satisfy their basic needs. They also accepted the idea that providing everyone with a basic level of wellbeing is a general social obligation — something that all citizens, depending on situation and ability, should contribute to fulfilling. They did not subscribe to the idea that the benefitter should always pay, or that the benefits that people get out of society should be equal to their contributions.

Equity and the aged

The experiments, which have been conducted in many countries, including Australia (Jackson and Hill, 1995), indicate that there is a wide consensus about equity, at least at the level of generalities. This consensus can be regarded as defining the social contract in respect to issues of equity. The fact that a large number of people share a moral view does not make it right. It could be argued, for one thing, that equality of opportunity requires more equality of resources than the experimental subjects, mainly university students, allowed. But the fact that the conclusion reached by the experimental groups was the result of reflection and discussion and embodied the values of a liberal democratic society gives it some credibility as a reference point. Significant departures from it would require justification. So let us consider the implications of this ‘consensus view of equity’ (the tacit idea of the social contract shared by many citizens) for debates about how the burdens associated with an ageing population should be distributed.

There are three relevant considerations. The first is that the elderly are in some respects among the least well off people of a society. Some of them (those without significant assets) are poor by any standard. Others have assets but little income. Many have special needs and will depend at some stage on the care of others. Those who favour the consensus idea of equity, as described above, should believe that their society ought to ensure that the basic needs of the elderly are satisfied.

The second consideration is that the elderly are likely to be perceived as ‘deserving’. Most of them have made a contribution to society and it is reasonable to suppose that those who accept the consensus view would favour supporting them on a higher guaranteed income than would be provided to the unemployed, who (according to some participants in the experiments) should be supported on a fairly low income so that they will have an incentive to look for a job. The fact that the job opportunities for the elderly and their ability to participate in the workforce are likely to be diminished is another reason for thinking that they should receive a fairly high level of support.

The third consideration that is likely to influence ideas about being fair to the aged is that there is a well established practice in societies like ours of working people supporting their elderly predecessors. To the extent that this has become

an expectation, people are likely to regard policies that truncate or reduce this support as unfair. It does not seem likely that this expectation does, or should, depend on whether elderly cohorts are large or small.

The responsibility for meeting the needs of the elderly should be fairly resistant to changes in the level of affluence of a society. A social contract which insists that basic needs of citizens, especially the needs of the elderly, should be satisfied ought to hold for better or worse, richer or poorer. Under less affluent economic conditions the burden of meeting needs will be greater for taxpayers, but according to the consensus view, this is not inequitable. In particular, meeting the needs of the elderly is no more or less important as a moral objective in a rich society than in a society not so rich (though level of affluence is likely to make a difference to an assessment of what these needs are).

In an extremely poor society, where even the most well off have barely enough to satisfy their own needs, the required sacrifice may be too great. Rawls believes that his theory of justice applies only to societies that have reached a certain level of affluence. The same condition may also hold for the consensus view. However, the level of affluence should not have to be all that high before the obligation to share with the less well off becomes salient. If Australian society in 30 years time is less affluent because of the existence of a large ageing population, or for other reasons, this does not diminish the responsibility of taxpayers to meet the needs of the elderly. It would be contrary to the consensus view — indeed most views about equity — if the elderly were made to bear the brunt of bad economic fortune just because meeting their needs requires comparatively greater sacrifice by taxpayers.

Responsibilities of the ageing

Should members of the baby-boomer generation be expected or required to save more for their old age? Though the consensus view of equity does not require that everyone should pay for all the benefits they receive, it is compatible with the view that those who can contribute to social objectives should be required to do so. The idea that citizens have obligations to contribute, as well as rights to benefit, is so widespread that it can be regarded as part of the tacit social contract.

Let us assume that supporting an ageing population will impose a significant burden on future taxpayers. It seems reasonable, and in line with the consensus view of equity, that meeting this burden should be a general social responsibility shared by members of society according to their ability to contribute. If this is so, ageing people should not be expected to meet all of the costs by themselves. It is not their fault that they belong to a particularly large birth cohort. But it is reasonable to require that they should contribute to meeting the costs that their old age will inflict on their society. So if it seems necessary for a society to save resources in order to care for an ageing population, then ageing baby boomers ought to contribute a share, along with younger members of society.

Should ageing people be required to ensure, so far as they can, that future taxpayers pay no more than did their predecessors for the care of the aged? The

consensus view of equity that is being used here as the reference point does not require this. It allows that economic fortune and contingencies outside of anyone's control may increase or decrease burdens on taxpayers without raising issues of equity.

It might be argued that if baby boomers suffer hardship in their old age, they are to some extent responsible. They should be prepared to surrender some of their assets to younger generations. They should save more for retirement. Kelly and Harding (2004) suggest that baby boomers are defeating the purpose of superannuation by taking voluntary early retirement and cashing in on their savings — thus requiring younger taxpayers to fund their later years of retirement. Questions arise about whether early retirements have really been voluntary. If a society expects older people to contribute more — a reasonable idea so long as older people are fit and healthy — then they should have opportunities to do so. Nevertheless, Kelly and Harding have a point. However, citizens and governments have a right to expect that schemes meant to ensure that people have a reasonable income in old age should be used for that purpose.

There may be other things that ageing or elderly people can be expected to do to fund the expenses of their old age. It might be fair to require elderly people who are tying up valuable assets in the form of property to sell some of their holdings. It seems reasonable to insist that people who are wealthy, however that wealth is held, should be expected to make a larger contribution to satisfying their own needs or the needs of others in their society. But this requirement should not be used to separate elderly people from possessions that have great meaning for them and their families or which enable them to maintain an independent life. Any viable policy on this issue is likely to require compromise in order to gain widespread acceptance.

Equity and medical needs

From the perspective of a widely held view about equity, it has been argued here that a reasonably wealthy society has the responsibility of ensuring that its citizens are able to satisfy their basic needs, and that the prospect of an ageing population is not reason for abandoning this view or for imposing extra sacrifices on the ageing. However, the increasing costs of medical and pharmaceutical benefits might be regarded as posing a problem for a social contract based on the consensus view.

Let us assume that the *Intergenerational Report* rightly estimates that the costs of subsidising medical benefits are bound to increase as new pharmaceuticals and treatments become available, and that an ageing population will exacerbate the problem. Let us also assume that there is a limit to the medical costs that a government can bear, no matter how affluent the society. However, individuals are bound to regard medical procedures that can save their lives or vastly improve the quality of their lives as essential to their wellbeing. This means that even an affluent society will not be able to provide everyone with all the resources that individuals regard as basic.

There is no generally accepted or obviously right solution to this problem. If a government responds by decreasing subsidies and increasing cost to consumers of medical resources, then some people will fail to get what they need simply because they are too poor. The elderly are especially vulnerable to rising costs. The other alternative is to ration scarce medical resources according to other criteria: the relative contributions that individuals can make, or have made, to society, or their degree of responsibility for their ailments. If this strategy is adopted, then it might be decided that all things being equal, the life and health of young people should take precedence over the health needs of the very old (Daniels, 1988). However, there is no uncontroversial way of making such decisions, and how to deal with rising medical costs is a matter which needs to be more widely discussed by Australian citizens.

Intergenerational Equity Over Time

The discussion has so far concentrated on the issue of how resources and responsibilities should be distributed among contemporaries who belong to different age groups. Let us now turn to the issue of how resources should be distributed among birth cohorts.

Birth cohorts overlap and the people in them interact. They are related as children to parents and grandparents, nieces and nephews to aunts and uncles, students to teachers, and so on, and it is common for people of older generations to care about the future of those who are now young. Rawls writes future generations into the social contract by assuming that parents are predisposed to care about the wellbeing of their descendants and will be prepared to make sacrifices for them. However, not all people are parents or have sentimental ties to the young. Moreover, environmentalists point out that the ability of present people to affect the wellbeing of generations far in the future means that a view of intergenerational equity which focuses on relations between present people and their immediate descendants is not adequate. For these reasons, the discussion will consider views about intergenerational equity which regard present people, children and the not yet born as citizens at different, but sometimes overlapping, time periods of an intergenerational society.

Equality of resources over time

From a strictly egalitarian point of view, intergenerational equity means equality in the distribution of resources over time. Each birth cohort should enjoy the same level of affluence, a result that could be achieved, to a limited extent, by transferring resources between cohorts. If it is believed that future generations will be wealthier than present generations then there is no need to save for them. On the contrary, since present generations are relatively less well off than generations of the future, present people would be doing nothing wrong if they accumulate government debts that future taxpayers must pay. This would merely count as a transfer from the well off to those not so well off. On the other hand, if

there is reason for pessimism about future prospects — if it is believed that future generations will be less well off — then the egalitarian idea of intergenerational equity gives present generations an obligation to save so that some of their wealth can be transferred to future people.

The egalitarian concept of intergenerational equity is clearly impractical. Since no one can know what level of wealth future generations will enjoy, it is impossible to equalise resources over time. In any case, it is not clear that equality of outcomes should be the aim of intergenerational policy. Most people would not think it inequitable if it turns out that future generations are richer than their predecessors. So why should it be regarded as inequitable if future people are less well off (Beckerman and Pasek, 2001)? It is notable that Rawls requires only that present generations do what they can to ensure that future people will inherit the liberal democratic institutions of their society and will have sufficient wealth to maintain a just society (Rawls, 1972).

Equality of opportunity over time

Other views about equity seem equally impractical or unfair when applied to intergenerational relationships. The idea that those who own scarce goods should be free to use and dispose of them as they please is unfair if some members of younger generations will never have a chance to acquire these goods. The view that a birth cohort should pay for all its benefits and shoulder all its costs ignores the possibility that war, social crisis, environmental problems or other contingencies might impose extra burdens on a citizen at a particular time. It seems unfair to require them to foot the bill all by themselves for the effects of outrageous fortune.

From the perspective of the consensus view — the reference point of the discussion of equity between age groups — it seems that all present generations are required to do for the future wellbeing of the young and not yet born generations is to ensure, so far as this is possible, that they will have resources sufficient to allow each individual to satisfy his or her needs. According to this idea, there is no requirement for present generations to save so that future people will be as affluent as them. There also seems to be no necessity for present generations to avoid imposing costs on the young.

However, this straightforward application of the consensus view to relations between present and future generations also fails to provide a satisfactory account of equity over time. The reasoning of those who find the consensus view plausible depends on the assumption that opportunities are available to citizens to rise above the guaranteed minimum income by hard work and the exercise of talents. An idea of equity that allows inequalities in the name of desert can only be justified if a society provides individuals with equal opportunities to be deserving. If opportunities for advancement are extremely limited, then condemning some people to a minimum income no longer seems fair.

To be fair to future people, present generations ought to do more than ensure that they can obtain the minimum they need to satisfy their needs. If present

generations hand on to their successors a social world in which opportunities for receiving benefits are diminished, then they would be doing them an injustice. This reasoning about intergenerational equity leads to the conclusion endorsed by the philosopher Barry (1999): that intergenerational equity requires equality between the opportunities available to individuals of future generations and those available to members of present generations. Practically speaking, this means not only that the economy should remain healthy, but also that opportunities for work, education and achieving their goals should be available to members of younger generations.

Starting from the widely accepted view about equity discussed in the last section, we have reached the conclusion that equity over time requires that opportunities of people of future generations be equal to those of present people. This does not necessarily mean that future generations have to be as wealthy as present generations. A society with a lower average income may provide as good and as plentiful opportunities for its citizens as a society with a higher average income. However, affluence and opportunities tend to go together, and those who hold that sustaining opportunities is a requirement of intergenerational equity, must also accept an obligation to ensure that their society will remain wealthy — though not necessarily as wealthy as it is at present.

Ensuring future opportunities

An obligation to ensure that members of future generations have opportunities also means that those concerned with intergenerational equity cannot ignore concerns about distributive justice among existing generations. There is evidence indicating that disadvantage can persist through generations: that the poverty of parents tends to diminish the opportunities available to their children. Future generations might choose to compensate those who have been disadvantaged by lack of opportunities in early life. If they believe that equity requires equal opportunities, they might regard it as a duty to do so. But it would be unfair to leave the burden of compensation to them if present people can act now to alleviate problems caused by disadvantage. Moreover, the ability of people to obtain and enjoy the greatest rewards of their society may depend on the opportunities available to them in their childhood. Compensation, if it came to them only in adulthood, would arrive too late.

Intergenerational equity requires that members of future generations have opportunities equal to those of present people, and it may require that present generations accept some responsibility for overcoming problems that could diminish the opportunities of future citizens. However, this conception of intergenerational equity encounters a difficulty that faces every view about justice over time.

Uncertainty about the future

How can present generations ensure equity for future generations when there is so much uncertainty about what the future holds? Uncertainty grows as distance

from the present increases. But given the rapid rate of technological change, uncertainties associated with the global economy, and the unpredictability of political events, making predications about the state of Australia in 30-50 years time is also a problematic activity, as debates about the effects of demographic change demonstrate. No one can know exactly what young and not yet born citizens will need, what problems they will face, or what technology they will have available to them. No one can know what effects present actions will have on their prospects. The best efforts of present generations to contribute to their wellbeing may do them little good. Apparent threats to their wellbeing may turn out to be of little consequence. Future generations may have technology and wealth capable of dealing with the problems or debts that they inherit from the past. Or, on the other hand, they might not.

The future is uncertain and beliefs about future prospects are likely to be wrong in some respects — perhaps drastically so. This doubt also applies to the projections made by those who assume that future generations will be wealthier. Mc Donald's optimistic projections are based on the observation that living standards have been steadily increasing since the industrial revolution (McDonald, 2004). The problem is that long term trends do not necessarily continue indefinitely into the future, and some scientists believe there is reason to fear that our economic prospects are gloomier. The Australian Greenhouse Office (Pittock, 2003) warns that climate changes caused by greenhouse gases and reduced ozone levels will have a serious effect on the major export industries of forestry and agriculture over the next 50 to 100 years, though costs to the economy are impossible to estimate. There are other acknowledged threats to Australia's productive capacity (for example, dryland salinity). Whether these threats are serious is a matter of debate. But the existence of reasonable doubts about the long term viability of important economic activities underlines the point that we cannot be sure that even well founded projections of economists can be relied on.

How should the problem of uncertainty influence ideas about intergenerational equity? The following are possible responses:

1. Uncertainty about the future means that there is no useable conception of intergenerational equity. In practice, there is nothing that present people can or should do for future generations.
2. It is reasonable to be optimistic about future prospects. The weight of the evidence suggests that Australians of the next generations will be wealthier than present generations and will have at least as many opportunities to exercise their talents. It follows that present generations have no obligation to save for future generations. Their obligation to the young and not yet born consists only in ensuring that they will inherit liberal, democratic institutions.
3. It should not be assumed that Australians of the next generation will be well off, and there is some reason to think that they might not be. This means that in formulating policies that affect future generations, present generations ought to apply the precautionary principle: to avoid policies that have a

chance of causing serious and irreversible harm. It is better for present generations to impose costs on themselves that may prove unnecessary than to risk harming future generations. Since failure to save economic and environmental resources could cause serious and irreversible harm to future generations, present generations ought to save.

4. It is reasonable to be moderately optimistic about prospects for the future. Present generations should not be expected to make sacrifices or forego benefits just because there is a chance that Australians will not be well off in the future. Only if there is a likelihood of serious, irreversible but preventable threats to the economic or social prospects of future Australians should present generations be expected do something to prevent or alleviate them.

The first option makes uncertainty about the future into a reason to be sceptical about the practicality of any idea of intergenerational equity and should be rejected just for that reason. Uncertainty is not the same as having no basis for any views about future prospects, and policy makers have to take some position about the rightness of their policies in respect to future generations. The second is problematic, not only because it ignores the doubts of some environmentalists and those who take a more pessimistic view of the effects of demographic change. It can also be criticised because it relies so heavily on assuming that the future will be like the past. If this turn out to be wrong, it is impossible to compensate future people, and this in itself might seem a good reason to try to avoid burdening future generations. The third adopts what some regard as a responsible strategy and what others view as an overly cautious version of the precautionary principle. The fourth recommends a less strenuous version of the precautionary principle. It allows us to impose some risks and possible costs on future generations.

Whether people favour the third or fourth option will depend partly on their views about the consequences of an ageing population and about other matters, environmental and social, that could affect future prospects. There is, as we have noted, considerable disagreement among experts about these empirical matters. Choice of options will also depend on views about the acceptability of risks and costs. Rawls (1972:287) argued that justice between generations is a matter of doing for future generations what we think our predecessors ought to have done for us. The same idea could be used to make judgments about the acceptability of putting future generations at risk. However, people have different attitudes toward risk, and for this reason are likely to have different opinions about the risks that they and future generations should be prepared to tolerate.

Conclusion

The prospect of an ageing population has put intergenerational equity on the political agenda. In respect to the problems associated with demographic change, there are two kinds of equity issues. The first has to do with relations between age groups: how responsibility for the burdens of an ageing population ought to be

distributed among people of a society. Using a plausible, widely accepted view of equity, it has been argued that it would not be fair to impose extra burdens on ageing citizens in order to solve problems associated with demographic change. The second group of issues has to do with intergenerational equity between birth cohorts: in particular, the duties of present generations to ensure the future wellbeing of the young and the not yet born. It was also argued that equity between the generations requires that present generations ensure, so far as possible, that future generations have opportunities equal to those of present generations. But how this can be assured is bound to be a matter of debate, given the uncertainties about the future and different ideas about the acceptability of imposing risks and possible costs on people of the future.

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Helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper by two anonymous referees and people associated with the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance are gratefully acknowledged.