

# A FAIR GO

Barbara Brookes

Expert commentary

**ΤΕ ΤΑΡΕΚΕ**  
FAIR FUTURES  
IN AOTEAROA

ROYAL  
SOCIETY  
TE APĀRANGI

## TE TAPEKE FAIR FUTURES

Royal Society Te Apārangi has convened a multidisciplinary panel of leading experts\* to examine issues of equality, equity, and fairness in Aotearoa.

The panel's name, **Te Tapeke**, comes from 'ka tapeke katoa te iwi'<sup>†</sup> and conveys valuing and including all people. This expert commentary expresses the view of the author.

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### Barbara Brookes

#### Te Tapeke Fair Futures Panel

Barbara Brookes (MNZM) is a historian of gender relations and the history of health and disease in New Zealand and Britain. She is Professor Emerita at the University of Otago.

Barbara's work provides historical perspective on contemporary debates about gender equity as well as health services. Her recent award-winning book *A History of New Zealand Women* surveys women's roles and experiences from the first waka to 2016. In 2018, she was awarded the Royal Society Te Apārangi Humanities Aronui Medal for her contribution to women's history.



\* [royalsociety.org.nz/fair-futures](http://royalsociety.org.nz/fair-futures).

<sup>†</sup> Joshua 4:11–13. 'Including all people, without exception'.

# A FAIR GO

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‘If New Zealand believed in fairness it’d join other countries in introducing a Google tax now’, wrote commentator Terry Boucher in *The Spinoff*, 11 June 2019 (1). His challenge clearly rested on the belief that New Zealanders do indeed believe in fairness as a key value in our society. Where did this belief come from?

In 19th-century New Zealand newspapers, the term ‘a fair go’ mostly related to sport – horse racing in particular. But every now and then, it related to the kind of society New Zealand should be. ‘A Labourer’ wrote ‘An Open Letter’ to labourers working on farms as station hands in 1896, recommending a certain politician for the following reasons:

He is not gifted with a great flow of political gab; neither does he make promises that he never intends to fulfil; neither is he a “toff” who puts on side and belongs to a clique. He is a plain-spoken fellow just like one of ourselves, and a grafter too! A man of sound judgment; generous, honourable, straight as a dart; and a real good one at that. ... he will give a fair go in return for the confidence you place in him (2).

The writer encapsulated many of the values New Zealander settlers believed shaped their society: honesty, egalitarianism, plain speech, and hard work.

The idea of a ‘fair go’, historian David Hackett Fisher argues, stands out in New Zealand political rhetoric in contrast to the United States where ‘fairness’ is likely to be seen as hostile to freedom and to inhibit capitalism. Depending on when colonial settlements were founded, their governments evolved differently. New Zealand’s – in the words of Prime Minister Julius Vogel (1876) – promoted ‘symmetry and consistency’ and ‘uniform legislation’, which were underpinned by ideas of equity for settlers, if not for Māori (3). New Zealanders, as one author put it, ‘have consciously chosen to have less social inequity and less geographic unevenness in the provision and distribution of their public goods’ (4).

In 1948, political scientist Leslie Lipson claimed that in New Zealand, ‘democracy in the sense of government by the people [had] come as near to fruition as in the Athens of antiquity’ (5). At that time, more than one-fifth of the labour force were in the public service and many citizens were involved in the over 700 local bodies in operation in a country of 1.75 million. The result, Lipson suggested, was that most people ‘look upon the state quite healthily as being themselves under another form. When it acts, they feel that they are acting. What it owns, they own’ (5). Lipson was sanguine about race relations, holding that New Zealand, with a Māori population of about six per cent, was ‘relatively free’ from race friction (5). All that was to change as the Māori population grew rapidly and moved from rural areas to urban centres at an extraordinary rate.

The first official celebration of Waitangi Day, on 6 February 1961, led to a reminder of just who had been excluded from the New Zealand dream of equality. At Waitangi, there was a call for ‘A “Fair Go” for the Maori’. City life was said to be ‘full of pitfalls for young Maori people’, who – as a result of booming birth rates and limited rural opportunities – were increasingly forced to move to urban areas in search of paid employment. Pākehā were asked to welcome, befriend, and employ Māori – in short, to give them a ‘fair go’ (6).

That commitment to ‘a fair go’ might be seen in a multitude of ways and with varied meanings. In 1966, the Communist Party of New Zealand produced a book entitled *Is This a Fair Go?*. A report to the city council on Wellington’s walkability in 1978 was named ‘A fair go for the average pedestrian’. National Party leader Robert Muldoon used ‘A Fair Go for the Ordinary Bloke’ as a campaign slogan when he (successfully) ran for Prime Minister (3).

The 1987 guide to the Fair Trading Act took the title ‘A Fair Go for Consumers’. The Alzheimer’s Society asked for *A Fair Go for Dementia* in a 1990 publication. The Labour Party’s 1992 plan to end youth unemployment was called ‘A Fair Go for Youth’, while the short-lived United Party produced *Building Social Justice: a fair go for all: United New Zealand* in 1996. By the 2000s, health came to the fore with the Public Health Association asking for *A Fair Go: Achieving Equity in Health* (2002), and education academic Gill Rutherford making a plea for inclusion of students with disabilities in *Getting a Fair Go? Issues and practices regarding teacher aide support of students with disabilities* (2002). Reflecting New Zealand’s growing inequality, the Office of the Children’s Commissioner produced *A Fair Go for all Children: Actions to address child poverty in New Zealand* in 2008.

In 2012, Colin James, a political journalist, argued that the Ombudsmen's service should 'ensure a fair go', which he wrote was what 'New Zealanders expect'. He explained, 'A fair go is as good a chance as possible to get on in life without other people, including bureaucrats, getting in the way. But government action is critical: a fair go is impossible without a decent education, and decent healthcare and help when one can't help oneself' (7).

Not unexpectedly, New Zealand has not been alone in this commitment to fairness. Australians, according to writer Trish Bolton, have 'long defined their country as the land of the 'fair go' (8). Canadians also think of fairness as 'an organizing principle' (3). New Zealand, however, may have a particular commitment to fairness based on its small population and its remote location from the big powers (9). Being small has traditionally led to a high degree of political participation by New Zealand citizens. Up until the 1980s, some 90 per cent of eligible voters participated in the national elections. In 2014, about 80 per cent of eligible New Zealanders voted, compared to the about 58 per cent who voted in the 2016 United States' elections and the about 60 per cent who voted in the United Kingdom's elections. New Zealanders, therefore, have a higher investment in seeing the state

as acting for them than those in much bigger countries. We could speculate that the decline in New Zealand's electoral participation since the 1980s might mirror the increasing extent of inequality in this country, which has resulted in sectors of the population feeling disenchanted with government.

Whatever the levels of disenchantment, a commitment to fairness remains visible in New Zealanders' cultural life through the long-running and tremendously popular *Fair Go* television programme. The show first aired in 1977 – the creation of media star Brian Edwards and producer Peter Morritt. Current *Fair Go* presenter Pippa Wetzell believes that the programme is so embedded in New Zealanders' psyche that if someone can't get the lid of a jar they say, 'better call Fair Go' (10). And many New Zealanders do contact the programme when they feel ripped off, unfairly treated, given the runaround, or simply ignored. Duncan Grieve, *The Spinoff* editor, who reported settling down to watch the show recently, claims it trades on a national trait which is 'a desire for justice to be "status blind"' (11).

In 2019, New Zealand's Royal Society Te Apārangi convened an expert panel to consider 'equality, equity and fairness' in this country, (12) 'to identify structural drivers; and explore the research evidence for initiatives that could enhance equitable opportunities for future generations of New Zealanders'. That commitment to a fair go for all New Zealanders remains strong; the panel's task is to keep it that way.

Barbara Brookes

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