
Seniors Weren't 'Thrown Under Bus'

By Ben Bernanke Thu, Apr 2, 2015

In this excerpt from the former Fed chairman's first blog post at the Brookings Institution website, he defends himself against the charge that his low interest rate policy has been bad for retirees.

When I was chairman, more than one legislator accused me and my colleagues on the Fed's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee of "throwing seniors under the bus" (to use the words of one senator) by keeping interest rates low. The legislators were concerned about retirees living off their savings and able to obtain only very low rates of return on those savings.

I was concerned about those seniors as well. But if the goal was for retirees to enjoy sustainably higher real returns, then the Fed's raising interest rates prematurely would have been exactly the wrong thing to do. In the weak (but recovering) economy of the past few years, all indications are that the equilibrium real interest rate has been exceptionally low, probably negative.

A premature increase in interest rates engineered by the Fed would therefore have likely led after a short time to an economic slowdown and, consequently, lower returns on capital investments. The slowing economy in turn would have forced the Fed to capitulate and reduce market interest rates again.

This is hardly a hypothetical scenario: In recent years, several major central banks have prematurely raised interest rates, only to be forced by a worsening economy to backpedal and retract the increases. Ultimately, the best way to improve the returns attainable by savers was to do what the Fed actually did: keep rates low (closer to the low equilibrium rate), so that the economy could recover and more quickly reach the point of producing healthier investment returns.

A similarly confused criticism often heard is that the Fed is somehow distorting financial markets and investment decisions by keeping interest rates "artificially low." Contrary to what sometimes seems to be alleged, the Fed cannot somehow withdraw and leave interest rates to be determined by "the markets."

The Fed's actions determine the money supply and thus short-term interest rates; it has no choice but to set the short-term interest rate *somewhere*. So where should that be? The best strategy for the Fed I can think of is to set rates at a level consistent with the healthy

operation of the economy over the medium term, that is, at the (today, low) equilibrium rate. There is absolutely nothing artificial about that! Of course, it's legitimate to argue about where the equilibrium rate actually is at a given time, a debate that Fed policymakers engage in at their every meeting. But that doesn't seem to be the source of the criticism.

The state of the economy, not the Fed, is the ultimate determinant of the sustainable level of real returns. This helps explain why real interest rates are low throughout the industrialized world, not just in the United States. What features of the economic landscape are the ultimate sources of today's low real rates? I'll tackle that in later posts.

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