Neumann, K. (11 October 2007). Compassion is the value we often settle on. The Age.

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The government has identified ten Australian values. Prospective citizens are now quizzed about their knowledge of and commitment to those values. One of them is ‘tolerance, mutual respect and compassion for those in need’.

Prime Minister John Howard has often sung the praise of compassion and spoken of Australia as a compassionate nation. He has tried to colonise a terminology traditionally associated with his political opponents, and at the same time respond to frequent accusations that his reign has been marked by a lack of compassion, particularly towards asylum seekers. ‘We are a decent generous, compassionate humanitarian country, but we also have an absolute right to decide who comes to this country’, he insisted in late August 2001 while the Tampa was drifting in waters near Christmas Island.

As an item of political language, compassion is contested. Its ownership and its meaning have been fought over, particularly since the late 1990s. The compassion referred to by the prime minister is not the same as the compassion demanded of the prime minister by refugee advocates who are decrying Australia’s mandatory detention policies.

In 2003, during the anniversary commemorations for the victims of the Bali bombing, John Howard was photographed alongside two young children, whose mother had been one of those victims. Unbeknown to Howard, their father, Ebrahim Sammaki, was a failed asylum seekers who was being held in the Baxter detention centre. A few weeks after the Bali memorial service, the then Minister for Immigration, Amanda Vanstone, granted Sammaki a visa to allow him to sponsor the migration of his children to Australia. She justified her decision by saying that it was ‘in the national interest to demonstrate that Australia is a compassionate country’.

Like John Howard and his ministers, most of those advocating a more generous approach to asylum seekers have been deeply concerned about the image Australians have of their nation and the image Australia conveys to the outside world. They, too, have understood compassion to be something that could be exercised by the government on behalf of all Australians. They haven’t disputed the assumption that compassion is only for those who deserve it; instead they have challenged the
government’s view that asylum seekers are undeserving: they have argued that asylum seekers are good people and would make excellent citizens.

The government and its critics agree that compassion is an Australian value (even though the latter say that the government’s commitment to that value isn’t genuine). I believe we should be more suspicious of compassion. It is fickle; it is not directed towards the ones whose suffering is most severe, but towards those who appear most deserving; it can easily turn into pity; it can be manipulated; and it may not help the sufferer because it does not require action.

Compassion on its own cannot be trusted. It needs to be qualified and supported: by reflections on what makes us compassionate, a commitment to justice, and a sense of responsibility.

Nations don’t have feelings. But policy makers could experience compassion and act compassionately. Unlike her predecessor, Amanda Vanstone was sometimes prepared to let herself be moved by stories of individual suffering. Maybe she did feel genuine compassion for the Sammaki children, and for that reason overrode established policy. In that case, compassion would have played a role in tempering a policy formulated in response to Australia’s supposed national interest. That role could have been more substantial if her compassion had allowed her to recognise the fundamental flaws of that policy. In that case, compassion would have triggered a policy review.

That is not to say that a policy maker’s compassion should directly result in a new policy. On two occasions in recent Australian history, refugee policy was driven by compassion. In June 1989, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Prime Minister Bob Hawke allowed Chinese nationals studying in Australia to remain here. Arguably that was poor policy because it compromised the refugee determination process. In 1999, the Howard government offered a sanctuary to several thousand Kosovars, after the compassion felt by many Australians forced its hand. Arguably, that, too, resulted in poor policy: the resources spent on the evacuation of refugees to Australia should have been used to fund relief measures closer to the source of the problem.
In an ideal world, good policy is the outcome of informed political debate. How could one debate policies based on compassion (other than to question the very fact that compassion has guided political decision making)? The political philosopher Hannah Arendt commented perceptively: ‘the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and to remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for public display.’

Frequent references to a compassionate nation and the undisputed status of compassion as an Australian value indicate how Australians would like to see themselves. Would it not be more desirable to be part of a nation whose government and whose citizens are committed to striving for social justice for all residents (rather than to ensuring that ‘those in need’ are objects of their compassion)? Would it not be more desirable to be able to identify as citizens of a nation that meets its responsibilities as a global citizen to the full extent of its capacity (rather than of one that is charitable)?

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Professor Klaus Neumann works at Swinburne University’s Institute for Social Research. This is an edited extract from his inaugural lecture, which he delivered last night at the State Library of Victoria.