

The Politics of Compassion

By Dr Mark Croweller AFSM

The Shifting Meaning of Compassion: From Shared Suffering to Distant Sympathy

The meaning of compassion has drifted over time. Historically, compassion meant “to suffer with,” implying proximity—physical, emotional, and relational closeness between the sufferer and the one responding. Churches and community organisations excelled at this because they stayed close to those in need. But, as Marvin Olasky observes, modern compassion has become increasingly passive and distant. Today, compassion often means simply feeling moved by the suffering of others—or, at most, sending a cheque and allowing government agencies to do the real work.

In this shift, compassion has been thinned out. We become spectators of suffering rather than participants in its alleviation. And when the responsibility shifts from people to governments, compassion becomes entangled with ideologies—socialist, conservative, or neoliberal—each framing suffering and its causes through very different lenses.

Compassion through Political Eyes: Socialism, Conservatism, and Neoliberalism

Some scholars distinguish between socialism’s structural explanations of suffering and conservatism’s moral ones. Socialism tends to attribute suffering to systemic failures, advocating large-scale government interventions. But this risks creating dependency, weakening civic bonds that traditionally sustained communities. Conservatism, meanwhile, emphasises individual responsibility and moral fortitude, often concluding that suffering results from personal shortcomings. This can lead to a paternalistic approach in which the morally “superior” regulate those seen as morally deficient.

Compassionate conservatism, popularised by leaders like George W. Bush and Tony Blair, attempted to synthesise these perspectives by promoting “tough-minded” compassion. In practice, it often justified punitive welfare-to-work programs, reductions in state support, and policies premised on correcting the behaviour of those suffering. Through this lens, compassion becomes conditional: granted only to those deemed morally deserving.

Neoliberalism deepens this dynamic by transforming emotions—including compassion—into marketable resources. Emotional intelligence becomes a tool of productivity rather than relational understanding.

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Personal responsibility is re-anchored not in community but in economic self-management. Compassion, rather than a moral virtue, becomes an impediment to efficiency. A neoliberal society allows only those forms of compassion compatible with productivity, self-reliance, and market logic.

The result is a political culture in which some suffering counts more than others, and compassion becomes an act of judgement: we ask who deserves our concern and who does not.

Universal Compassion: Love, Justice, and the Trouble with Politics

To push beyond selective compassion, we need to examine the concept of universal compassion—a compassion for all sentient beings. At its heart lies love, but not the personal, romantic, or familial love that political theorists often dismiss as irrational or apolitical. Instead, universal compassion is grounded in agape—selfless, unconditional concern for another’s welfare—and in the Buddhist forms of affectionate, wishing, and cherishing love. These forms of love dissolve power differentials and judgments of worthiness. They create room for political compassion because they orient us toward the broader community and its suffering.

Yet compassion alone is not enough. As theologian Marcus Borg argues, compassion without justice risks perpetuating the very systems that create suffering. Systemic injustices—whether economic, racial, or political—cannot be resolved through kindness alone. They require structural change, accountability, and moral courage. Anger, too, plays a role: sometimes the suffering of others must evoke indignation to motivate political action.

But anger in politics is double-edged.

The Ambiguous Power of Anger

Anger can illuminate harm and injustice. It sharpens attention, pierces apathy, and makes suffering visible. Scholars argue that anger, when disciplined, can serve compassion by identifying wrongdoing and demanding change. In this sense, anger can be politically generative—a tool of protest and transformation. But anger, left unchecked, becomes dangerous. It narrows perception, intensifies blame, amplifies moral certainty, and fuels hostility toward outgroups. Anger also distorts judgment: it increases punitive tendencies, inflates confidence, reduces careful thinking, and can even produce pleasure in the suffering of adversaries. The Nietzschean version of anger—self-righteous, vengeful, unwilling to understand context—erupts especially in environments shaped by neoliberal or moralising narratives.

The psychology is clear: anger lingers, grows, and easily becomes misdirected. It oversimplifies complex causes of suffering. It produces arrogance, overconfidence, and prejudice. When used to fuel political compassion without discipline, anger can become coercive, vindictive, or violent. For this reason, Buddhist philosophy warns that anger and compassion cannot coexist in the mind at the same moment. Anger blocks compassion; the mind cannot hold both states simultaneously.

Thus, anger poses both an opportunity and a threat: it can motivate justice, but it can just as easily perpetuate suffering. However, rejecting anger does not mean ignoring injustice. The suffering of oppressed groups must be acknowledged, heard, and acted upon. Those who hold societal power have a responsibility to create avenues through which grievances can be voiced compassionately and safely. Peace and patience without justice simply reproduce suffering. To cultivate true political compassion, leaders must listen deeply, respond effectively, and recognise the need for equitable access to power, wealth, and resources.

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Ubuntu: An Alternative Political Framework for Compassion

To imagine political compassion beyond anger, we can turn to the African philosophy of ubuntu, which blossomed in South Africa during the dismantling of apartheid. Under Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, South Africa did not descend into the vengeance that many feared. Instead, a culture of interdependence, mutuality, and shared humanity emerged—one in which people became “border crossers,” able to engage across lines of race, history, and harm.

Ubuntu, often translated as “I am because we are,” reflects an understanding of identity rooted in relationship. It emphasises generosity, hospitality, care, and collective well-being. One’s humanity is bound up with the humanity of others, so to harm another is to diminish oneself. Tutu argued that forgiveness is necessary not only for compassion but for self-preservation; without it, both victims and perpetrators lose their humanity.

Ubuntu’s origins predate colonialism, expressed through oral traditions that link individual suffering to communal life. Modernity and globalisation altered ubuntu, but its core remains: a relational ethic that values harmony, goodwill, and the intrinsic dignity of every person. Some critics argue that ubuntu has been used for nationalist agendas or romanticised into a vague ideal. Yet despite these criticisms, ubuntu remains a potent example of political compassion in practice.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission embodied ubuntu by creating conditions in which forgiveness and accountability could coexist. It encouraged people to see each other not as enemies or oppressors, but as members of a shared human community—even when confronting atrocities. Tutu reminded South Africans that those who supported apartheid were also victims of a dehumanising system; when they harmed others, they harmed themselves as well. This recognition helped prevent widespread violence and opened pathways toward collective healing.

Compassion as Political Transformation

Ubuntu shows what political compassion can look like when built on interdependence rather than judgement. It offers an alternative to neoliberal individualism and punitive conservatism. Where neoliberalism sees the self as sovereign and competitors as obstacles, ubuntu sees the self as interwoven with others. Where anger divides, ubuntu unites. Where compassionate conservatism judges who deserves help, ubuntu removes the question of deservedness altogether.

Ubuntu also reframes compassion as risk worth taking. Compassion breaks down rigid, rationalistic boundaries, compelling individuals to encounter their shared vulnerability and mutual belonging. It invites leaders to respond not merely as political actors but as human beings moved by the suffering of others. Political compassion becomes less about redistributing benefits and more about restoring humanity—ours and others’.

Five Lessons for Leaders

1. *Neoliberalism can dull compassion* by moralising suffering, overvaluing self-reliance, and delegitimising emotional understanding. Leaders must resist this pull.
2. *Anger must be handled carefully*. It can alert us to injustice but can easily distort judgement, fuel arrogance, or inflict further harm.

3. *Deservedness should not determine compassion.* Leaders must focus on the causes of suffering, not whether victims are deemed worthy.
4. *True political compassion requires both courage and restraint.* Courage to confront injustice; restraint to act without anger's distortions.
5. *Ubuntu offers a powerful model.* It shows how compassion, justice, and forgiveness can coexist—even in societies emerging from profound trauma.

Ultimately, political compassion is neither naïve nor sentimental. It is a rigorous ethical practice. It requires leaders to see suffering clearly, understand its structural causes, and act with integrity and humanity. Compassion is not merely an emotion but a political virtue—a force capable of shaping societies, healing wounds, and guiding public institutions toward justice and dignity for all.

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