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The Stories We Tell Ourselves:

Discourses of Compassion in Australia's Asylum Seeker Debate

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In the years since 2001, Australian governments on both sides of politics have at times appealed to compassion to justify their asylum seeker policies. The discourse analytic literature has generally glossed over these appeals – assumedly dismissing them as hollow politicking or rationalisation. Given the hardline policies these discourses have often accompanied, this dismissal is understandable. A systematic analysis of government appeals to compassion, however, reveals something important about the structure of Australia's asylum seeker debate. Drawing upon the work of scholars such as Nussbaum and Bertard, this paper argues that government constructions of compassion have grounded the concept not in solidarity, but in privilege. In reserving compassion for the weak and the passive, these discourses have not only allowed Australian voters to understand themselves as 'compassionate' in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, but – like government declarations of toughness and sovereignty – have also allowed Australians to see themselves as powerful.