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Founder and Former Director of The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture

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European Woman of Achievement 1993; Order of the British Empire(OBE) 1997; Honorary degrees from the following Universities: Oxford, Glasgow, Dundee, Ulster, Essex, Open and American International (London)

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What price a compassionate society?

My paper will reflect a journey which began in the recently liberated former concentration camp of Bergen Belsen. It was there that I began to understand a society in which its citizens are commanded and rewarded for their ability to perform horrendous acts in the name of the state. I witnessed the plight of the victims and the difficulty for the liberators in maintaining their original sense of outrage and compassion. I saw bureaucratic structures being established which served not only to provide for large numbers of the displaced and dispossessed but also acted as a shield behind which the providers could protect themselves from the suffering of those they were there to protect.

The paper will discuss the significance of language in responding to those who have survived massive catastrophic events. Depersonalisation may become as important a tool to the liberator as to the perpetrator.

The journey will reflect on post war responses and attitudes to a group of 720 young orphan children from Auschwitz who were brought to England in 1945, both within the host society and those who were responsible for their care, and will explore the capacity for denial in both.

The paper will recognise the contribution of individuals in starting what has become a world wide human rights movement and the importance of human right law. It will recognise the advances in science, medicine and the psychological sciences, but in reviewing society's response to present day survivors of persecution, torture and war, the question will be asked.

Are the bureaucratic responses to asylum seekers very different from those facing the displaced persons of the past, is the media and public language so different, and is the fate of those found unworthy of saving, so different from those whose ships were turned back and sunk and who were forced back across frontiers?

Finally, the paper will reflect the challenges to an organisation which grew out of the human rights movement, dedicated to the care of victims of torture, in responding to a government programme designed to whittle away the rights of its patients, and the dilemmas for the doctors and therapists in facing the deprivation, homelessness and ultimate deportation of those they work to protect.