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**Sensible or Senseless:
A frame analysis of the Sensible Sentencing Trust's penal
populist discourse**

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Abstract

Recently many western societies, including New Zealand, have seen a distinct change in public attitudes towards law and order. Support for more punitive forms of punishment have seen governments adopt tougher penal and judicial policies. Scholarly attempts to define and understand this phenomenon have resulted in creation of 'penal populism'. Penal populism operates as a discourse that defines the arguments made for tougher sentences, harsher prison conditions, and greater rights for victims' of crime as well as conceptualizing the intricate social conditions from which these changes are born. This research is concerned with the discursive positions used to construct penal populist discourse; the ideas which argue for punitive reform. The aim of this research is to delineate and understand the discursive resources deployed by penal populist organizations as they seek support from the public.

This research examines the penal populist discourse produced by the Sensible Sentencing Trust as a case study. The SST is New Zealand's preeminent organization dedicated to punitive reform. As a penal populist organization, the SST operate within a complex penal populist social movement; a global collectivity, where various groups and actors are bound by a punitive narrative. Frame analysis, a qualitative research method, will be used to identify penal populist discursive positions and understand their function as a resource used to elicit support from the public. The three fundamental processes of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing will be identified to understand how the SST frames their discourse to produce a meaningful punitive message that resonates with the public.

This research suggests that the SST gain and retain support for their cause by adapting fundamental conservative concepts with their penal populist discursive positions. The SST act as a signifying agent, interpreting the political philosophy of compassionate conservatism and aligning conservative principles. This act of re-contextualizing conservative concepts to suit the

discursive needs of New Zealand's law and order debate translates their inherent resonance into the punitive narrative. Compassionate conservatism functions as a master frame, a conservative grammar, or algorithm that structures penal populist discourse making it strike a responsive chord with conservative members of the public. This act of framing however has potentially negative implications. The SST's framing creates an anti-liberalism frame that acts as an important discursive unit. This frame is hegemonic; seeking to dominate the national law and order conversation by casting contrary penal and judicial discourses as an adversary. This has the effect of divisively curtailing constructive law and order debate in New Zealand.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgement	iv
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. The Sensible Sentencing Trust Revealed: Structure, history and methods	6
Introduction	6
The SST: Origins and structure	6
- Origins of the SST	6
- Resources at the SST's disposal	9
- Goals of the SST	11
- New Zealand penal populism and the SST	14
- Influence of the SST on the New Zealand justice system	18
- The SST and the penal populism social movement	20
Conclusion	22
Chapter 3. Introducing penal populism scholarship	23
Introduction	23
The punitive turn	24

Defining penal populism	27
Penal populism and public opinion	30
Penal populism and the media	34
Penal populism social movement	37
Compassionate conservatism	38
Conclusion	43
Chapter 4. Research design: Understanding discursive frame analysis	45
Introduction	45
Frame analysis	46
- What is framing	46
- Frame analysis: Collective action frames and master frames	49
- Master frame extension	51
Sampling and method of analysis	53
- Sampling	53
- Analytical approach	54
Conclusion	57
Chapter 5. Understanding penal populist discursive positions:	
Diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing	58
Introduction	58

SST's diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing of the justice system	60
- SST's discursive positions regarding politics and legislation	60
- SST's discursive positions regarding the judiciary	63
- SST's discursive positions regarding parole	68
Victims Stories: The SST's framing regarding the victims of crimes	71
SST's framing of criminals: the alien other	76
Penal populism frame resonance	78
Conclusion	81
Chapter 6. Master frame alignment: Conceptualising the	
influence of compassionate conservatism within the SST discourse	82
Introduction	82
Compassionate conservatism as a master frame	84
Compassionate conservatism master frame alignment with penal populist frames	88
Extension of the 'erosion of core societal values' frame	93
Compassionate conservatism frame resonance and narrative fidelity	98
Conclusion	100
Chapter 7. Discussion/ evaluation: Understanding the function	
of penal populist discursive resources	102
Introduction	102

Understanding the hegemonic function of penal populist discursive resources	103
Power relationships within penal populism	106
Limitations of frame analysis	109
Conclusion	112
Chapter 8: Conclusion	113
Bibliography	118
Diagrams	
Diagrammatic representation of SST discourse frame analysis	59
Diagrammatic representation of compassionate conservatism master frame alignment	83