

Private Contractor Serco Escapes Scrutiny in the Detention Debate*

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I visited Villawood on Sunday—alongside a delegation of union leaders and Greens Senator-elect Lee Rhiannon—and met several asylum seekers subsequently involved in the protest that ended peacefully last night with the arrival of UNHCR officials. We spent hours conversing with men in their 20s and up from Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

They all said they couldn't understand why the Immigration Department had told them personally that it was now safe enough for them to return home as any objective examination at the rate of violence in these war zones would indicate the exact opposite. For example, in Afghanistan killings have only escalated this year despite a "surge" of American troops.

The contradictions and obfuscation of the Labor and Liberal policies towards refugees is one reason the Greens capitalised at the recent election and are now urging a thorough review of the entire detention process. The mental deterioration of detainees is a major issue needing examination, a point powerfully made last week by some of the country's leading doctors.

But what remains mostly ignored is the company that runs all of Australia's detention centres, the British multinational Serco. In the past days, its name is mentioned in passing at best, save for statements such as this that featured in *The Australian* online on September 20: "Detention services provider Serco will provide a report to the police and the department on the circumstances surrounding the [Fijian] man's death."

But that's it. Even when the Murdoch broadsheet sends reporter Paige Taylor to visit the remote Curtin detention centre in Western Australia, there is no mention of Serco; what it does, how it operates, how much more money the company receives now that the facility is being expanded or whether such places should be privatised in the first place. Today's editorial in *The Australian* questions the adequacy of mental health services in detention but doesn't name the company running the show.

The mainstream media barely reported the Labor government signing a contract with Serco in 2009 and today many details of the agreement remain "commercial-in-confidence".

Earlier this week, when a detainee escaped the Darwin detention centre, the ABC news report simply stated: "Serco, the company responsible for security at the centre, is preparing a report on the escape." No follow-up and no further questions. I am well aware of the difficulty in obtaining accurate and timely information from the corporation but this is no excuse to place entire blame for the current dysfunctional culture on the Immigration Department.

Today saw yet another roof protest at Serco's Villawood detention centre and a very brief but welcome mention in the *Australian* about the company's role in the detention centre in Cape York. However when it came to providing comment from Serco the article noted:

"Serco, the British-based private security contractor in charge of the centre, already holds the contract for security at every Australian immigration detention facility. It has refused to be interviewed."

Crikey spoke to Immigration Department spokesman Sandi Logan for comment about the actions of Serco in Australia. He said contractually Serco would only speak publicly over a “fairly substantial issue”—he mentioned the recent News Ltd story over Serco bringing in front-line staff from overseas—but his department gave the bulk of comments over the firm’s actions.

I questioned why Serco is given political and media cover plus the fact that transparent access to the company’s facilities is severely restricted. Logan didn’t deny my analysis but simply repeated the contractual obligation between Serco and the Australian government.

The Australian government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to outsource these essential tasks. A leading refugee lawyer recently told me that Canberra would be incapable of now managing detention centres as years of privatisation had resulted in a massive deterioration of ability within the public service. Besides, he lamented, the government had no desire to run these places again. Note how rarely Immigration ministers or their opposite number even mention Serco.

The British press are far more persistent when it comes to Serco. There are still hundreds of children in detention in the country and Serco runs one of the most notorious centres,

Yarl’s Wood. Collusion between the British government and Serco is rampant with cover-ups of abuse, hunger strikes, mental problems and violence.

I asked the detainees at Villawood whether Serco staff treated them with respect. Some said they did, while others claimed Serco employees often showed disdain for their culture. Aggression was occasionally reported. Effective mental health services, despite Immigration Department spokesman Sandi Logan saying they are first class, are sadly lacking because mandatory detention exacerbates trauma. I heard weeping Afghan Hazaras literally begging me to not allow Australia to send them back to certain death at the hands of the Taliban.

There is a degree of unreality at Villawood where the visiting centre for detainees is now decked out with flat-screen TVs, yellow couches, Aboriginal dot paintings and photos of trains racing through the desert.

Serco—“bringing service to life”—is the convenient firm that’s always there to manage “clients”—but providing comfortable seats simply masks the mental torture of waiting for months or years for government decisions.

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