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THE UK BORDER AGENCY'S LONG, PUNITIVE CAMPAIGN AGAINST CHILDREN

By Clare Sambrook

16 July 2012



The Pinocchio Protocol

The appalling Rochdale sexual abuse scandal prompted long-overdue scrutiny of our children's homes. Another national disgrace ripe for exposure is the UK Border Agency's serial and repugnant oppression and abuse of vulnerable children over more than a decade. Today OurKingdom publishes Clare Sambrook's exposé of the Border Agency's abuse of children and its relentless misrepresentation of evidence of harm. We call upon Parliament to hold ministers, the Home Office and its ugly agency to account. (The material that follows is distressing.)

Lunchtime at Yarl's Wood

Sunday, 20 September 2009, the UK Border Agency's Yarl's Wood detention centre run by commercial contractors Serco.

A woman enters a room and finds a five-year-old child inserting his finger into another five-year-old's anus, moving it backwards and forwards.

The little boy whose anus has been penetrated tells his mother that one of the other boy's much older brothers has done this to him several times before. He complains of pain in his bottom, has become emotionally distant, will not let his mother touch him.

A GP employed by Serco does not examine the boy internally, concludes that his bottom is sore because he has scratched it, says psychological effects are a matter of "wait and see". Bedfordshire children's services decide not to take the matter further.

There is no investigation of the young people who might have sexually abused the little boys, or of whether they might pose a continuing threat to other children within the detention centre.

The mother's pleas for a specialist's opinion, for therapeutic help for her son, for an independent investigation, are all refused.

The Border Agency's so-called "[Children's Champion](#)", whose job is to protect and promote children's welfare and safety, fails to intervene. [The Children's Society](#), a Church of England charity that provides welfare services to Yarl's Wood families, also fails to act. Mother and son are rapidly transferred out of Yarl's Wood and removed from Britain.

A special culture

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of this story, [which is fully documented as we shall see](#), is that it holds so few surprises for people familiar with the Border Agency's special culture.

Paediatricians, psychiatrists, psychologists and child welfare experts who have exposed inconvenient truths have seen their work and reputation traduced by Border Agency officials. Their advice has been ignored, summarily dismissed, even derided. Viable alternatives to detention

offered by reputable experts have been ignored. Parliament has been repeatedly misled.

Doctors, nurses and charities who step inside the culture may forget their critical faculties, their moral compass and professional ethics.

This dossier highlights just some of the Border Agency's attempts to misrepresent evidence that children, including the sexually abused little boy, have been harmed in its care. It follows the pattern of misrepresentation and denial all the way to the current "[compassionate approach](#)" to child detention — a practice that continues despite the Coalition promise to end it.

An exciting growth market

For the Agency's commercial partners, security companies G4S, Serco and the rest, immigration detention is one growth market within an "[exciting](#)" [outsourcing boom](#), grounded in cosy relations with ministers and civil servants.

The Labour government's aggressive acceleration of the detention policy in 2001 gave the security industry new opportunities to extract profit from every step of the process: arrest, transport, detention, removal — even healthcare and social work within the rapidly expanding "detention estate".

From its opening in 2001, Yarl's Wood detention centre was run for profit, first by GSL, part of what is now the world's biggest security company [G4S](#),* later by service company [Serco](#).

The Border Agency and its commercial contractors set about the raiding and detention of families with remarkable enthusiasm and disregard for children's welfare, detaining up to 2000 children a year in prison-like conditions, sometimes for weeks and months on end, against all professional advice.

The Home Office and its Agency brushed aside [repeated warnings](#) from [successive](#) European Union Human Rights Commissioners and [repeated recommendations](#) from the HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), urging over years that the detention of children should happen only in exceptional circumstances, and decisions must be based on "[independent](#)

and immediate welfare and needs assessments of each child.”

For the border control mind, and commercial contractors’ culture rooted in the cash transit business ([G4S](#)), and transport and maintenance ([Serco](#)), “children’s welfare” has proved an inscrutable concept.

An [HMIP team](#) visiting Yarl’s Wood in the Spring of 2005 found three children who had been detained immediately before their GCSE exams and one autistic five year old so distressed she had not eaten for five days.

England’s first Children’s Commissioner, Sir Al Aynsley-Green, called repeatedly for detention to cease, saying that [nothing in his 30-year career as a children’s doctor prepared him for his first visit to Yarl’s Wood.](#)

His first report, [“An announced visit to Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre 31st October 2005”](#) records that none of the children he encountered had any idea why they were locked up. Many had been in Britain for years or were born here. One boy in school uniform had been snatched with his mother as he was about to catch his school bus, with no opportunity to say goodbye to his classmates. The children were subjected to body searches, sometimes several times a day. Three had been locked up for more than 57 days.

Handcuffs in hospital

The security industry’s priorities, culture and clout shine in a chilling “Memorandum of Understanding” struck in 2005 between Yarl’s Wood’s managers, GSL, and Bedford Hospital which empowered GSL to handcuff children who needed hospital care. The document (in my possession), which defines a child as “a human being up to the age of 18”, permits GSL escorts to overrule medical objections to the handcuffing of child patients. If doctors or nurses persist in objecting, GSL escorts may insist the cuffs stayed on, pending a decision from a higher authority, namely the GSL Duty Shift Manager who would rule on whether the cuffs stayed on or not, or whether to delay medical treatment “until alternative security measures can be put in place”.

[“For staff in general the centre is like a human clearing house,”](#) Yarl’s Wood chaplain Larry Wright told a team from HM Inspectorate of Prisons who visited the detention centre in February 2006. Their report, [“Inquiry into the quality of health care at Yarl’s Wood immigration removal](#)

[centre](#)”, published in October 2006, found multiple healthcare inadequacies, compounded by the Border Agency’s “unresponsiveness . . . to clinical concerns about an alleged history of torture or adverse medical consequences of continued detention.”

When clinical concerns were raised, the Inspectors found, “the information was not systematically addressed or actioned. Nor was independent medical opinion sought or adhered to.”

HM Prisons Inspectorate urged the government quickly to transfer responsibility for detention centre healthcare from the Home Office to the National Health Service. A very important recommendation, since the Home Office’s behaviour towards people in its care was plainly distorted by its over-riding concern to police national borders.

Serco took over the running of Yarl’s Wood (including healthcare) from GSL in April 2007 with an [eight-year contract valued at “around £85 million”](#).

That same year, under pressure, the government instructed the Border Agency to require all staff dealing with children to undergo mandatory training in child safeguarding. Instead of commissioning an independent, accredited provider, the [Agency’s “Children’s Champion” turned to unaccredited G4S](#). Since then, without any independent scrutiny or evaluation, G4S has trained 7,800 UKBA personnel in “keeping children safe”.**

“Wholly inaccurate” records of child detainees

Children were anything but safe. In February 2008 [HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#) learned that some children detained time and again had been locked up for a cumulative 275 days. “Wholly inaccurate” official figures had calculated their cumulative totals at 14 and 17 days.

Visiting Yarl’s Wood again, in May 2008, Children’s Commissioner Sir Al Aynsley-Green found that [“Children’s physical and mental health rarely appears to inform the decision to maintain detention.”](#) and medical assessments were poor.

In his [report on the visit](#), published in April 2009, Aynsley-Green notes that one mother locked up at Yarl’s Wood was a victim of torture with “a

severe depressive illness” and “auditory hallucinations”, yet her two-year-old son was assessed by detention centre medical staff as just a “happy boy”. The mother “was prescribed anti-depressants and put on suicide watch in the light of three suicide attempts. Yet no mental health support was provided, nor was an assessment of her parenting abilities conducted.” Aynsley-Green repeated his call for child detention to end.

Roll calls, body searches, sex games

The first peer-reviewed clinical study of children locked up at Yarl’s Wood, [“The mental and physical health difficulties of children held within a British immigration detention center.”](#) appeared in the medical journal “Child Abuse & Neglect” in October 2009.

The authors, Lorek et al, a team of NHS paediatricians and a clinical psychologist, recorded children’s “increased fear due to being suddenly placed in a facility resembling a prison”, their weight loss, headaches and tummy pains, their clinical depression and anxiety, the trouble they had sleeping, how older children were so stressed they wet their beds and soiled their pants.

The Lorek team described the body searches, the photographing and the fingerprinting of the children, the roll calls, the ID cards they had to carry at all times, the ten locked doors between freedom and the family centre, the steep deterioration in parents' mental health and parenting abilities, the self-harm and the suicide attempts.

And the sex games. One father, “spontaneously complained that he had found his daughter in the centre without any clothes on. His child explained that she had been encouraged to undress and play ‘sex games’ instigated by another detained child.”

Another mother, “spontaneously commented on the sexualized behavior of children within the center”.

The doctors wrote: “The high levels of mental and physical health difficulties detected support the view that detention, even for short periods of time, is detrimental and not appropriate for children.”

(One of the authors speaks about their findings on the BBC [here](#).)

The study was sent to members of the parliamentary Home Affairs Committee ahead of their visit to Yarl's Wood on 15 October 2009 in the course of their inquiry into the detention of children in the immigration system. (The committee's duties include scrutinising the Border Agency's work). Committee chairman Keith Vaz MP later [reported to the House](#): "Our visit was somewhat marred by the Home Office officials' terrible anxiety about the Select Committee visit."

What the Border Agency did next is quite shocking.

An ex-policeman assesses the medical evidence

The Agency's director responsible for children and their welfare, the curiously entitled "Director of Criminality and Detention", Dave Wood, decided to offer his own assessment of the clinical evidence.

Dave Wood is not a paediatrician or a child psychologist. He is a former Metropolitan Police Deputy Assistant Commissioner who [led the Met's Anti-Corruption Squad as Detective Chief Superintendent](#). (He gave evidence to the [Independent Police Complaints Commission's 2006 inquiry](#) allegations of police corruption in the Stephen Lawrence murder investigation.)

In September 2009, in [oral evidence to the Home Affairs Committee](#), Wood had said that although absconding wasn't an issue — "it's not terribly easy for a family unit to abscond" — families should be locked up anyway, because the lack of detention, "[would act as a significant magnet and pull to families from abroad](#)".

In a memo to the Home Affairs Committee, dated November 2009, Wood set out to be "helpful" and "[provide some further details in response to concern you may have about the contents of the \[Lorek\] report](#)."

The study, he claimed, "was undertaken without any reference to the UK Border Agency or its clinicians. At no point were healthcare or centre staff, who would have known the children, asked for their views or comments. A number of criticisms are therefore made without any corroborated evidence, or with any opportunity for the centre to comment."

(Here is Wood on [local BBC TV](#) again asserting that the doctors failed to discuss their research).

This was demonstrably false. Lorek's peer-reviewed study clearly demonstrates their contact with Yarl's Wood clinicians; indeed the Lorek team's psychologist had recommended that five parents should be "[assessed by a psychiatrist as a matter of urgency due to the severity of their mental health difficulties and the level of risk](#)".

Meetings the Agency claimed did not happen

What's more, Home Office documents (in my possession) record that two of the authors presented their research to Border Agency officials in a roundtable discussion held at the office of the Children's Commissioner for England on 19 June 2007, during which Jeremy Oppenheim, the Border Agency's then "Children's Champion" invited the doctors to make a further presentation inside Yarl's Wood.

And they did, at a formal meeting on 27 September 2007 entitled "Meeting to Discuss Health Impacts of Detention on Children".

The 26 invitees listed on another Home Office document (in my possession) include Serco healthcare staff, Bedfordshire County Council Social Workers, a representative of security company G4S, the Border Agency's Chief Immigration Officer Fiona Jack, its "Children's Champion", its Deputy Director of Enforcement Policy Stephanie Hutchinson-Hudson, its Head of Detention Brian Pollett and its Assistant Director, Detention Special Policy Unit, Simon Barrett.

According to the Home Office Agenda, at 10.10 am, after an introduction from the "Children's Champion", two of the authors, Dr Lorek and Dr Nesbitt, gave a presentation entitled, "Physical and Mental Health Difficulties of children within a UK Immigration Detention Centre".

The Home Affairs Committee's report, [The Detention of Children in the Immigration System](#) was published on 29 November 2009. It [completely ignored the Lorek study](#).

It is hard to understand this significant omission. Perhaps MPs on the committee simply accepted Wood's [assertion](#) that the study "was undertaken without any reference to the UK Border Agency or its

clinicians.” It seems that they did not challenge him. But even if what he alleged were true, the weight of *Lorek et al*’s professional assessment surely ought to have commanded the respect of the committee and formed part of their report.

Still, the evidence of harm to children did not stay buried long.

Royal Colleges exhume evidence of harm

On 10 December 2009 The Royal College of General Practitioners, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Royal College of Psychiatrists and the UK Faculty of Public Health issued a [joint statement](#) drawing upon Lorek et al’s evidence and urging the government to stop detaining children “without delay”.

Until detention stops, said the Colleges, detained children and young people should be referred immediately to Local Authority children’s social care as “[children at risk of significant harm](#)”. No child or young person with mental health problems or at risk of developing them should be detained. The Colleges, echoing urgent advice from HM Inspectorate of Prisons a full three years before, urged the government to put detention centre healthcare into the hands of the National Health Service and not the Home Office.

The Colleges’ widely publicised statement was backed by the Royal College of Nursing, the Association of Child Psychotherapists, British Association of Social Workers, the British Psychological Society and the UK Council for Psychotherapy.

But it cut no ice at the Border Agency, whose Director of Criminality and Detention Dave Wood assured *The Guardian*: “[Treating children with care and compassion is a priority. Families at Yarl’s Wood should get the same level of care available on the NHS, and they do.](#)”

On 14 December 2009, the Liberal Democrat MP Alistair Carmichael [asked the Labour government when it would stop detaining children](#). He said: “The report published last week by the coalition of the royal medical colleges made it clear that children who are detained in immigration removal centres suffer from mental health problems and consider self-harm and occasionally even suicide.”

Minister Meg Hillier, briefed by officials a few days previously, [parroted the Border Agency's false claim](#) about Lorek et al's research:

“Let me point out that the report in question . . . did not take into account the views of the clinicians who worked with those children and who know them.”

And so, again, medical evidence of children's suffering was misrepresented and dismissed, and again Parliament was misled.

Security industry nurses see “jolly happy children”

Amid continuing grave concern about medical ethics and competence inside the “detention estate”, the Royal Colleges had reminded practitioners working for the Border Agency and its commercial contractors of the basic competencies of their craft — history-taking, examination, investigation, treatment, referral and record-keeping, and of their legal duty to declare children unfit to be detained where detention appears detrimental to their mental health or wellbeing.

Nurses employed by Serco at Yarl's Wood routinely described child detainees in medical notes as “jolly” and “happy”, according to the third and final report on Yarl's Wood from Sir Al Aynsley-Green in February 2010 ([“The Children's Commissioner for England's follow up report to: the arrest and detention of children subject to immigration control”](#)).

The father of a 12-year-old girl told the Children's Commissioner's team that she had been arrested, beaten, sexually abused and humiliated by Nigerian soldiers. On admission to Yarl's Wood she was mute, refusing food for seven days. About one Yarl's Wood child whose mother had been raped in Africa and was hepatitis B positive, Serco nurses wrote under family history, “nil of note”.

The Children's Commissioner, an eminent paediatrician, reported that the Border Agency continued to send children unvaccinated to areas where TB is prevalent and measles and malaria endemic. More than a year after he had suggested it, the provision of bed nets was “still under consideration”. Aynsley-Green repeated his call for child detention to cease.

A covert attack on the Children's Commissioner

The Border Agency had read the Children's Commissioner's report in advance of publication. Yet again, its response to expert medical advice was to go on the attack.

The Home Office press office circulated [an unattributable and defamatory advance note to journalists](#), undermining the integrity of Aynsley-Green and his work. That extraordinary note, which invented inaccuracies in the report and then knocked them down, can be found [here](#) on page 13 of my own Parliamentary submission on official lying.

The black-ops briefing got results: Aynsley-Green's February 2010 report was arguably under-reported in the media. And the Border Agency carried on misleading.

Agency officials and their commercial partners Serco gave a positive, upbeat presentation about children's experience of detention to [Bedford Borough Council's Children's Services Committee on 23 February 2010](#), assuring committee members that the Children's Commissioner's report contained "issues" that were "unsupported or factually incorrect".

But inconvenient evidence of distress and physical damage kept on piling up. In March 2010 the government published [Baroness Nuala O'Loan's independent inquiry into](#) evidence of widespread abuse of asylum detainees, including children, at the hands of Border Agency escort contractors, including G4S. The abuses had been documented in the 2008 Medical Justice report [Outsourcing Abuse](#). O'Loan's inquiry found that there was "inadequate management of the use of force by the private sector companies"; she made 22 recommendations for change.

Readers might by now be able to guess what the Border Agency did next.

[In a foreword to O'Loan's report](#), Border Agency chief executive Lin Homer attacked the doctors and lawyers who had brought the abuses to light, accusing them of "seeking to damage the reputation of our contractors".

Leaving aside the defamatory nature of Homer's allegation against the doctors and lawyers, it is the case that "reputational risk" is a commercial matter and the proper concern of the companies themselves, their

executives, directors and shareholders — not for the Home Office.

Only months after the Border Agency had dismissed the evidence of abuse by escort contractors, a previously healthy man called [Jimmy Mubenga](#) [died](#) during a form of “restraint” by private escorts G4S exposed as dangerous in [Outsourcing Abuse](#).

The sexually abused little boy is not totally forgotten

The little boy sexually assaulted over and over again during his weeks locked up at Yarl’s Wood in the autumn of 2009 might have been forgotten by the Border Agency, its contractors and the resident children’s charity. But somebody else had found out about him.

The Children’s Commissioner’s team, in their review of the detention centre medical notes, had spotted the little boy’s horrible ordeal, had noted the lack of proper investigation, that safeguarding procedures had not been followed, had noted the mother’s desperate requests for independent investigation and medical examination, and that they had all been refused.

Sir Al Aynsley-Green sent a detailed and confidential report on the case to Bedford Borough Council, the UK Border Agency, Serco and [Bedfordshire Local Safeguarding Children Board](#), whose Serious Case Review Panel commissioned an independent investigation in October 2009. The panel decided that “a legally qualified person, independent of all the participating agencies” should conduct the Review, and appointed a barrister and mental health review tribunal judge in December 2009, causing real anxiety to Border Agency executives and their commercial partners, Serco. The profitable business of locking up families at Yarl’s Wood, which served as a useful deterrent in border control, was in jeopardy.

Only weeks ahead of the 2010 General Election, and before the independent investigation had made its findings public, the Home Office handed Serco [a £32 million contract](#), without competition, to carry on running Yarl’s Wood for three more years.

[The Coalition Agreement](#) of 12 May 2010 promised to end the detention of children, but instead of immediately ending it, immigration minister Damian Green said on 15 May that he was “[launching a comprehensive review of alternatives to child detention, including opening a dialogue](#)”

[with relevant stakeholders, organisations and experts.](#)”

To lead *this* Review, a legally qualified person, independent of all the participating agencies was *not* appointed. Damian Green turned instead to the Border Agency’s own Director of Criminality and Detention Dave Wood, who would co-chair a “working group” of invited civil society and voluntary sector groups. The other co-chair was [the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund](#) to whom besieged Border Agency executives had turned for help in the anxious months ahead of the General Election. The Fund’s representative, Patrick Wintour (founder of the [Employability Forum](#)), had engaged in private pre-election talks over months with officials — including chief executive Lin Homer, deputy chief executive Jonathan Sedgwick, the latest “Children’s Champion” Kristian Armstrong, and Dave Wood.

The Review started work formally on 1 June 2010. (Its terms of reference are [here](#).) Immigration minister [Damian Green told Parliament on 17 June](#): “We are carrying out the review as fast as humanly possible, so that the detention of children for immigration purposes can end and a practical alternative be put in its place.”

That might have been Damian Green’s intention, but it was no part of the Border Agency’s plan.

A shameful account of institutional incompetence

On 14 June 2010 the [Bedfordshire Local Safeguarding Children Board](#) released an executive summary of the independent investigative report into the case of child sexual abuse that had been so disgracefully mishandled. The investigators found that the Border Agency, the Agency’s “Children’s Champion”, its independent social workers, Serco’s medical staff and social workers, Bedford Borough Council’s children’s services and the local police had all failed in their duties to safeguard children in the Border Agency’s care.

What’s more, Border Agency officials had — yet again — misrepresented evidence that children were being harmed and being put at risk of harm. The Bedfordshire independent inquiry found that executives misled ministers about the safeguarding shambles that failed the little boy, and that ministers, relying on the Agency’s misinformation, decided to carry on detaining children:

“UKBA provided information, on the basis of which a ministerial decision was made affecting the continued detention of children. Although that factual information included reference to the incident leading to this review, there was no evaluation of the impact that this incident had on the propriety of detention.”

Malcolm Stevens, a former lead Children’s Services Inspector with the government’s Social Services Inspectorate, described the findings as “a shameful account of institutional incompetence”.

Commenting in [The Daily Telegraph](#) on 18 June 2010, Stevens urged the government to “reconsider the wisdom of its decision to repeat the error of the previous government in allowing the organisation most culpable – the UK Border Agency – to lead its current review of services for children in detention.”

He went on: “From the recommendations of this review, if there is one thing on earth that Border Agency should not do, it is that.”

But the government did not reconsider, and the Border Agency carried on leading the Review, with thoroughly predictable consequences:

“All summer, the UKBA made it plain that they were not willing to give up the power to detain children, as part of the policy of ending the detention of children,” said one participant, Syd Bolton, co-director of the Refugee Children’s Rights Project, Children’s Legal Centre.

“In the many discussions about how to end detention held with the UKBA over that review period, it was clear that the UKBA simply would not entertain the possibility of a major plank of its border control powers being removed.” ([Bolton was speaking](#) on 26 March 2011 at the launch of End Child Detention Now’s “Keep Your Promise” campaign.)

Rebranding child detention

What emerged from the Review was not an alternative to detention, but detention rebranded.

The Yarl’s Wood [family unit closed on 16 December](#) 2010, but the Agency has carried on locking up children at G4S Tinsley House, where [a 10 year](#)

[old girl had tried to strangle herself](#) in 2009.

[A new detention facility called “Cedars”](#) opened on 17 August 2011, with a new vocabulary (“family friendly” “pre-departure accommodation”), run by a familiar security company, G4S, and with the same fundamental safeguarding flaw highlighted in the Bedfordshire Safeguarding Children Board independent report on Yarl’s Wood, namely, “a gap in regulatory arrangements . . . no single agency has an adequate overarching responsibility for regulation of services to children in immigration detention”.

G4S ‘won’ the £15 million contract to run Cedars [against no competition](#). (The name is a government acronym for Compassion, Empathy, Dignity, Respect and Support).

Contract-hungry children’s charity [Barnardo’s provides welfare services](#) and delivers, by its presence, a reassuring endorsement. When, last year, an independent doctor asked Barnardo’s to take action about the continuing practice of sending families to danger zones without essential immunisation and malarial protection, Barnardo’s chief executive Anne Marie Carrie replied: “G4S, the UKBA contractor for the site is contractually responsible for ensuring appropriate health services to residents at Cedars,” and she had raised his concerns with the management team.

The doctor wrote to the G4S site manager and got a reply from the Border Agency in an envelope stamped with the G4S logo; it said malarial protection was a matter for the families and those who “have not arranged any malaria prevention will be provided with an information leaflet”.

A so-called “[Independent Family Returns Panel](#)” guards children’s welfare. [One of its members is Dr John W. Keen](#), who has advised the Border Agency for years, and whose assessment of a vulnerable patient was deemed “irrational” and “tainted” by the then Mr Justice Leveson in a 2006 High Court Judgement.

The Border Agency’s office of “Children’s Champion” carries on regardless of its catastrophic failure to intervene on behalf of the sexually abused little boy at Yarl’s Wood, and Border Agency staff continue to be [trained in child-safeguarding by G4S](#).

The Department of Health assumed *policy* responsibility for detention centre healthcare in April 2012; the transfer of *budgetary* responsibility is due, “subject to legislation”, by April 2014. ([Hansard](#))

In the first quarter of this year 53 children were [reported](#) detained, far fewer than under Labour’s 2000-per-year peak, but higher than might have been inferred from Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg’s December 2010 forecast of [“tiny numbers of cases” detained as “an absolutely last resort”](#).

In March 2012 Dave Wood was promoted to the post of chief operating officer of the UK Border Agency. In April, the Home Office quietly appointed as [chairman of the UKBA board a career investment banker, Philip Augar](#) (ex NatWest and Shroeders).

The narrow thread of recent history exposed here resonates beyond the hard lives of asylum-seeker families.

Security companies G4S and Serco have moved far, far beyond their security-industry base, deep into our public sector, securing massive government contracts in policing, health, education, welfare.

Senior civil servant and ministerial loyalty to “our contractors”, as revealed in this case, is a recurring phenomenon that merits further inquiry and real vigilance as Britain undergoes what the Financial Times has called [“the biggest wave of outsourcing since the 1980s”](#).

The pattern of Border Agency behaviour unfolded here suggests a rogue organisation, shielded by the Home Office, beyond accountability to Parliament and the public. Nobody has been held to account for the misleading of ministers, Parliament and the public over years, as a direct result of which thousands of innocent and vulnerable children have been locked up to the detriment of their health and wellbeing. Relations between the Border Agency and its contractors are intimate, enduring and enmeshed. Children remain at risk of harm.

The Home Affairs Select Committee should wake up to its duties, which include scrutinising the Border Agency’s work, call its executives to account for their repeated denial of evidence of children’s suffering, and urge the government to bring about a real and honourable end to child detention.

~ Special thanks to Martin Rowson for his original cartoon ~

Notes:

*** *GSL and G4S***

GSL was part of Group 4 Falck, the huge Danish security company that merged with Securicor in July 2004 to create Group 4 Securicor, rebranded in 2006 as G4S.

In June 2004, just ahead of the merger, [Group 4 Falck sold GSL to its management in a £207 million deal backed by private equity firms](#). Then, in December 2007, G4S bought it back again (for £355 million).

G4S chief executive Nick Buckles told the Financial Times in December 2007 that GSL had been sold “[to ease the progress of the merger as there would otherwise have been competition issues over prisoner transportation](#).” GSL, he said, would now “slot neatly into the next stage of G4S’s strategy to focus on long-term government contracts.”

**** *The UK Border Agency and “Keeping children safe”***

Thanks to pressure from the first Children’s Commissioner for England and HM Inspectorate of Prisons, among others repeatedly highlighting multiple deficiencies in the Border Agency’s treatment of vulnerable children over years, mandatory training in child safeguarding for all Border Agency staff in contact with children has been required since 2007.

That was enshrined in the [statutory guidance](#) to section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, which gave the Border Agency a duty to promote and safeguard the welfare of children.

The equivalent statutory duty on other public bodies to safeguard children was provided by Section 11 of The Children Act 2004 following the inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, but the UK Border Agency and its predecessors resisted these duties until they were imposed on them under section 55.

Children subject to immigration control, including those held in immigration detention in the UK, were excluded from the full rights and protections of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child until November 2008 when, under great pressure, the UK withdrew most of its reservations to the Convention.

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See also OurKingdom’s collections:

The scandal of child detention in the UK
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/collections/scandal-of-child-detention-in-uk>

G4S: securing whose world?
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