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Introduction

MANUFACTURING THE BORDER CONTROL SUPPLY CHAIN

INSIDE A LARGE, multi-purpose room at the back of a commercial estate near Gatwick Airport, a keen observer might notice a collection of clocks on the wall, each one set to a different capital city: Islamabad, Lagos, London, Tirana, Kabul. Ranged along a side wall they would see a large shelving unit, overflowing with boxes of pre-packaged, long-life Elka Daily Croissants in an array of flavours, 'hand-cooked' Tyrrells Potato Crisps, folded white paper bags with handles, and a pallet of small bottles of water. On the ground, in front of the shelves, lies a child-sized car seat and untidy piles of miscellaneous articles, which, upon closer investigation, include individually plastic-wrapped 'disposable urinals', sold under the brand name Travel John, designed for use when no toilet is available. 'They're filled with crystals,' an officer explains, 'so when you urinate in them, it crystallises immediately. We almost never use them.' The next time I go in, I notice boxes of them lying around which suggest otherwise.

Staff mill around the office in small groups at all hours of the day and night. Some enter in uniform, while others arrive in their own clothes. People wear a mix of items, this woman in a branded fleece worn over non-regulation black trousers and sturdy black shoes, that man in a corduroy blazer. Their items sometimes speak of long service, bearing the name of a previous employer who no longer manages the work they are doing. Those headed overseas bring in small wheeled suitcases for the plane. The 'medics' (paramedics) and the 'team leaders', sometimes called 'seniors' or 'points of contact', carry black bags. While the suitcases will be stocked with basic medication, medical equipment, observation forms and a handy rigid plastic folder on which to write notes, the bags hold cash, passports, risk assessment forms and other paperwork. Sometimes the team leader stuffs a pair of handcuffs in, too.

At least one of the group lugs an unremarkable backpack containing a black and red cloth waist-restraint belt and black leg-restraints. Everyone wears a

lanyard to which is attached a clutch of ID cards. Those heading to the airport should carry airside passes. They must also bring with them a fluorescent yellow, ‘high-vis’ (high-visibility) jacket or vest to wear inside the terminal grounds.

There is an ebb and flow in the car parks around the building as people arrive or end their shifts. White and silver vans adorned with the company logo line up near the door. Outside the metal fence, coaches from a different company park on the road, too big to pass through the boom gate.

Uniformed staff waiting for work to begin or returning from a job sit in small groups around tables in a kitchenette. Banter flows between colleagues who know each other, but people tend not to talk to strangers. Those heading to the airport stick together, as do others employed to drive around the country. The company, which employs both groups, provides them with teabags, long-life milk, a kettle, a fridge and a microwave. Sometimes the fridge has leftovers from a charter flight; ‘It’s always worth a look,’ I am advised.

In front of the kitchen area, managers sit at a long row of double desks, usually in business attire, although some are also in uniform. If they need privacy, they can assemble in a meeting room near the front door. The workspace includes a glassed-in ‘control centre’ where administrative personnel make travel bookings and check flight times, visas, passports and routes.

The head of this part of the business has a small private office adjacent to the control centre, on which the blinds are usually drawn for privacy; he prefers to look into the work area via CCTV feeds on the computer monitor. On a whiteboard, a neatly handwritten script reminds him of the daily conflict that likely lies ahead and urges him to be strategic: ‘I cannot change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.’ The slogan on his coffee cup is rather blunter: ‘I can explain it to you, but I can’t understand it for you.’

This mixed-use space is the headquarters of overseas escorting (OSE), part of the United Kingdom’s outsourced immigration detainee escorting system. These private contractors forcibly remove from British territory foreign national citizens who have been issued an administrative removal or deportation order by the Home Office. The contract for this work is currently held by Mitie Care & Custody, which bills itself as ‘the UK’s leading facilities management and professional services company.’¹

Spectrum House also serves as Gatwick Vehicle Base for in-country escorts who drop off and collect people at the two nearby immigration removal centres (IRCs), and from prisons and police cells in the south-east of Britain. Confusingly for those more familiar with the US context, this part of the business is known as ‘ICE’. Although the acronym shared with their US colleagues in ‘immigration and customs enforcement’ is unlikely to be purely

coincidental, in-country detainee escorting staff in the UK bear little resemblance to the heavily armed public-sector immigration agents in America.

Officers claim, some more disparagingly than others, that in-country escorting is merely a 'glorified taxi service', even though, like overseas work, it sometimes requires, and always allows for, the use of force on those held under Immigration Act powers. While most people do agree to be transported to a court hearing or even to the airport, not everyone does all the time. Like their colleagues who accompany people on the planes, ICE staff may use force to make them comply, although matters rarely come to that.

The in-country workforce is far larger than the overseas one, and this part of the contract generates considerably more income for Mitie than deportation does. In-country escorts also cover a much wider range of tasks. In addition to detainee transportation, ICE officers operate short-term holding facilities (STHFs) at ports and airports, including in Calais seaport, at the Eurotunnel terminal in Coquelles and at the ferry terminal in Dunkirk in northern France. In the UK, they manage small custodial units in asylum reporting centres and immigration tribunals, and three 'residential' short-term holding facilities (RSTHFs). The latter, where people can be confined for up to a week, are located in Manchester, Swinderby in rural Lincolnshire, and at Larne House in Belfast.

The Operational Control Centre (OCC) for ICE is far away, situated in another anonymous, but much more heavily securitised building in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. There, as we will see in the next chapter, Mitie employees sit at computer terminals arranging the transfer of immigration detainees around the UK, perhaps from a police cell or prison to an IRC or from one removal centre to another, to court, prison or hospital. They also arrange travel to the airport for those who have agreed to leave 'voluntarily', although this term designates a legal category rather than a strict preference. Their colleagues at the nearby vehicle base at Larne House shuttle people detained under immigration law to mainland Britain via the evening ferry or deliver them to the plane at Belfast airport for colleagues to collect on the other side of the Irish Sea, either to be placed in an immigration removal centre or to be expelled immediately.

Other countries have similar systems, although few have fully privatised all these tasks. In France, for example, the Police aux Frontières (PAF, the border police) manage all three roles of detaining, transporting and deporting foreigners. In Greece, regular police perform these duties, alongside their other roles. In the United States, there is a hybrid model, with state agents enforcing removal and deportation, usually across the southern border to Mexico, while private companies run most of the country's immigration detention centres. A mix of providers shifts people around the system.²

Wherever they are located, these systems have not received sustained empirical academic investigation, often due to significant barriers to research access. While scholars have paid some attention to the effects of transferring people between sites of detention,³ and to their experiences of immigration tribunals and reporting centres, there has been little consideration of the logistics used to deliver them, nor to the mundane sites of short-term custody themselves.⁴ As political theorist William Walters has observed, regarding studies on deportation,⁵ the ‘activity of transportation, the infrastructures, procedures, personnel and vehicles by which the “removal” of people is effected [is] frequently missing.’⁶

This book fills these gaps. Focusing on private sector staff, it explores their everyday actions and duties as well as their views of the people they detain and deport.⁷ In their routines and paperwork, as well as in their right to use force, it is these outsourced figures who maintain the logic and the feasibility of immigration control. Their job is to circulate and hold foreign nationals, to enable their identification and expulsion. Like other supply chain employees, they are poorly paid and easily replaced.

There are myriad such workers in this sector. While this study centres on the role of those employed by Mitie Care & Custody, which runs the business of immigration detainee escorting, the system depends on the willing participation of numerous other companies, subcontracted to provide a range of services: coaches for mass transportation, planes for charter flights, technology for geolocating the vans, ticketing agents for commercial flights, and so on. As the British government has hardened its approach to people who seek asylum, many of the same corporate actors provide a parallel system of temporary housing and confinement.⁸ Border control is a joint enterprise; a large-scale infrastructure project that, in redistributing people, shifts public funds into corporate balance sheets.

The complexity of the system suggested by the range of subcontractors stands at some distance from the banality of the tasks involved on the front line. There, in-country, uniformed staff sit under fluorescent lighting for twelve hours a day observing small numbers of people encased in glass-fronted secure waiting rooms. They drive vans up and down the country and escort people to the entrance of the plane. Except for moments of crisis or persuasion, interactions are kept to a minimum. Officers fill their time with paperwork, cups of tea and the internet. In some sites, days and even weeks may pass without the arrival of a ‘resident’, as the Home Office insists on referring to those who are detained. In others, like Dover, nearly every day is busy, particularly over the summer. Even staff assigned to deport people are not always needed; as will be explained in chapters 5 and 6, most flights are cancelled. On both sides of the business, staff turnover is high. During my research, the full

complement of in-country or overseas escorts stipulated by the contract was never attained.

The busiest people in the system appear to be those who plan, check and account for its operations. In their roles and actions, which include arranging flight paths and hotels, setting the daily rota, checking paperwork and reporting each day on the provision of service to their bosses, information is gathered for analysis and dissemination within the company as well as to their public sector ‘customer’, the Home Office. Such data, as I will discuss in chapter 1, are central to any logistics operation.⁹ They are obtained through a combination of bureaucracy and technology, as part of the daily duties of all employees, who are required to fill in forms and logbooks and to enter information into computers or handheld devices at regular intervals. Property lists are checked and re-checked every time a person is moved. Staff must assess the mental health and other vulnerabilities of those in their custody, and document what they find. The temperature of the fridge must be measured and verified, while snacks and other items are counted and recorded regularly as well.

These actions, as well as conversations with distressed people and the occasional use of force, characterise the work of immigration detainee escorting. Together, they facilitate the detention and forced mobility of foreign national citizens at the border and within. They do so, even as the purported goal of this system—to remove those without the right to enter or remain—often fails to be realised.

In making sense of this system, I have drawn on studies of labour, privatisation, logistics, bureaucracy and infrastructure, as well as legal and criminological accounts of punishment and border control, race and gender,¹⁰ to ask new questions about the logic, justification and effects of this administrative form of custody and expulsion, which so often fails to meet its own apparent goals. What keeps this system in place? How might it be more effectively challenged? Is an alternative future possible?¹¹

Privatising Border Control in the UK: A Brief History of the Present

In the twelve months before the start of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020, statistics shared with me by the Home Office showed that there were around 3,500 ‘in-country’ moves per month, of which the vast majority were recorded as ‘transfers’ between detention sites. Most months saw fewer than two hundred deportations facilitated by Mitie Care & Custody. The sum of people in reporting centres hovered around three hundred and fifty per month, while airport holding rooms confined more than ten times that figure. From

March 2020, when the global health crisis took hold and countries responded by closing their borders, numbers everywhere fell precipitously. No charter flights went out at all that month, and only one scheduled flight departed in April, and again in May. Reflecting the lack of immigration enforcement actions by the Home Office, the custodial units in reporting centres also emptied, with their numbers staying low for some time. While the virus had a significant impact on the system, in fact, as we will see in chapters 2 and 3, short-term detention is always characterised by considerable variation. In September 2022, for example, the number of arrivals in what Mitie record as ‘port holding rooms’, which include all the sites of short-term immigration detention they manage in ports and airports, ranged from just over ten at London City Airport to more than a thousand at Dover; the majority of whom would have been unaccompanied children or small family groups placed in the Kent Intake Unit (KIU). That same month Mitie held over eleven thousand people in Manston STHF, including more than two hundred children.

While the UK government has had the power to detain and deport foreign nationals since at least the passage of the Aliens Act of 1793, this modern ‘deportation regime’,¹² like the wider immigration and asylum system, has its origins in legislation in the second half of the twentieth century.¹³ Its current scale and form, however, are more recent still, owing much to the New Labour government of 1997–2010, whose legislative and policy reforms, as well as their fondness for public–private finance initiatives, lead to its expansion.¹⁴ More recently, operations have been affected by the hardening of rhetoric and law under successive Conservative administrations. Their approach culminated, in July 2023, in the passage of the Illegal Migration Act, which effectively ended the post-war consensus on the right to claim asylum in the UK.¹⁵

In parliament, immigration became a topic of debate as the British Empire came to an end. For many years, consecutive home secretaries from both the Labour and the Conservative parties ruled out new powers for expelling ‘British subjects’, even as emerging Commonwealth countries introduced their own citizenship laws. On 10 November 1949, for example, the Labour member of parliament for Birmingham, Raymond Blackburn, asked his colleague James Chuter Ede, then home secretary, ‘whether he will now initiate legislation to give him power to deport from Great Britain citizens of the British Commonwealth and Empire, not born in these islands, who have been convicted of crimes involving violence, fraud, or living on immoral earnings’.¹⁶ Ede was firm in his response: ‘Any extension of my powers to deport aliens which would empower me to deport also British subjects, or certain classes of British subjects, would open wide issues of such grave importance to

Commonwealth interests that I am not prepared to make any proposals for this purpose at the present time.¹⁷

Similar demands continued to be batted away throughout the next decade. However, by the beginning of the 1960s, the majority view had shifted. A Conservative government passed the Commonwealth Citizens Act 1962 with ease, introducing immigration controls for many people who had previously been welcomed to rebuild the UK after the Second World War, particularly those of the ‘Windrush generation’, as it later became known. Growing unemployment during the 1960s and the faltering post-war boom led to new forms of populist politics, fuelled by racist rhetoric and practices. Tougher immigration controls followed. The 1971 Immigration Act, passed by the Conservative government of Edward Heath, which forms the basis of many of today’s detention and deportation powers, effectively removed any remaining distinctions between former ‘British subjects’ and so-called ‘aliens’. Subsequent Nationality and Citizenship Acts consolidated this position. Although some pathways remained for members of the Commonwealth to receive visas, if not citizenship, Ede’s view of twenty years earlier no longer held. A shared imperial history offered no protection against expulsion.¹⁸

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 was a watershed piece of legislation in formalising and consolidating the system. Specifically, it was this Act which defined the appointment process and role of detainee custody officers (DCOs), ‘to exercise custodial powers in order to hold individuals safely and securely and to escort them both in the UK and overseas in order to enforce their removal’.¹⁹ For the first time, these security personnel were required to obtain a ‘certificate of authorisation’ from the secretary of state, and to complete a training course. Two years later, in 2001, the Labour government rebranded long-term detention facilities as ‘immigration removal centres’ and signed a series of contracts with private security companies to build new ones. That year the UK also began using charter flights to enforce large scale departures.

The private sector was involved in delivering border control from the start. For many years, however, its role remained small, ad hoc and reactive. Detainee transportation, for example, was initially facilitated by multiple agencies and individuals, including local taxi firms who bid for contracts to collect and deliver people across the country. Forced removals, similarly, were conducted by many groups, including the London Metropolitan Police, who operated a notorious ‘deportation squad’. Matters began to be formalised in 2000, when the Home Office signed a contract with Loss Prevention International to manage enforced removals.²⁰ This company worked alongside Wackenhut UK who already held the contract for immigration detainee transportation and short-term holding facilities. A British subsidiary of the US private security firm that had been established by a former FBI agent George Russell Wackenhut in the

late 1950s, this company was purchased, along with its American counterpart, in 2002, by Danish corporation Group 4 Falck, which itself merged two years later with Securicor to create G4S, one of the largest publicly traded global security corporations. In 2005 they were awarded the full contract for what are now called ‘in-country escorting’ and ‘overseas escorting.’ Since then, the business has continued to change hands every five to ten years.²¹

For the most part, the public appear to be indifferent to, or unaware of, this privatised system of immigration enforcement. Yet, there have always been moments when tragedy and controversy propel it into view. Sometimes, crises lead to policy change; at other times, the matter is quickly forgotten. In 1993, for example, Joy Gardner died in hospital following an attempt to deport her to Jamaica by the London Metropolitan Police’s ‘Alien Deportation Group.’ The police had forced a body belt onto her, while also binding and gagging her with four metres of tape.²² Public outcry terminated their involvement in deportation, and led to commitments from the home secretary that gagging would also end. Her death did not, however, disrupt deportations, nor quell the allegations about their violence.

Seventeen years later, in 2010, a second tragedy occurred, when Jimmy Mubenga died on a British Airways plane to Angola under restraint by the G4S officials enforcing his deportation. According to evidence provided at the inquest three years later, Mr Mubenga was

handcuffed in the rear stack position and restrained in a seat by the DCOs [...] in all probability, [for] between 30 and 40 minutes [...]. Mr Mubenga had died by the time the LAS crew reached him. Accordingly, when a defibrillator was applied, Mr Mubenga was showing asystolic meaning he was in complete cardiac arrest.²³

The escorting contract changed hands soon after, and, in consultation with the prison service and medical professionals, the Home Office designed new use of force training and techniques. Known as HOMES, an acronym deriving from *Home Office Manual for Escorting Safely*, in this system new forms of restraint were devised for application in planes and on vehicles to ensure staff bound people’s hands to the front of their body.²⁴ Neither of the two deaths altered the government’s commitment to enforced removals, however; nor did these tragedies diminish the enthusiasm of the private sector for bidding for the work. Reliance Secure Task Management, who were awarded the contract after G4S, were bought by Capita in 2012 and rebranded as Tascor. Five years later, when the contract came up for renewal again, it went to the current incumbents, Mitie Care & Custody. Their official statement, released on 14 December 2017, reported that they had been awarded a ten-year contract at an estimated cost to the public of £525 million:

Mitie will be responsible for escorting immigration detainees, both within the UK and overseas, on removal flights to detainees' home countries. The contract, which will start in May 2018, also includes the management of a number of fixed facilities throughout the UK, including airport holding rooms, reporting centres, and two short term holding facilities.²⁵

In addition to their existing contracts for immigration removal centres, this new deal made Mitie the 'market leader' in immigration enforcement, a position that is all the more striking given that their first contract, to run an IRC, Campsfield House, outside Oxford (£27 million over five years), had been awarded only six years earlier, in May 2011.²⁶ With their roots in cleaning and 'facilities management', they had seemed an unlikely contender. Yet, as subsequent chapters will make clear, their expertise in cleaning and their history of operating a remote workforce, as well as a network of sites, technology and hardware, turned out to be an advantage in managing this mobile system of border control.

Meanwhile, the crises of deportation continued to pile up. In April 2018, *The Guardian* newspaper revealed that then-home secretary, Amber Rudd, had pledged in 2017 to the prime minister Theresa May that she would increase deportations by 10 per cent. As critics pointed out, those targets had contributed to the unlawful deportation of people from the Caribbean who were entitled to British citizenship, in circumstances that became known as the Windrush Scandal.²⁷ Rudd's claim to parliament that she had been unaware of deportation targets within the Home Office was revealed to be a lie, and she was obliged to resign.²⁸ In response, the government temporarily suspended charter flights to Jamaica and released some people from detention. Other deportations were unaffected.

On the short-term detention and transportation side of the contract, there have been fewer high-profile events, although these practices occasionally attract condemnation. Newspaper articles in the 1980s, for example, criticised the treatment of people held in short-term holding facilities in Heathrow Airport, as well as the duration of their confinement.²⁹ More recently, since 2018, the rising number of people crossing the English Channel in small boats in search of asylum has led to a steady stream of custodial innovations, including the construction of an entirely new short-term holding facility in the Manston Royal Air Force base near Dover, where people are confined in tents.

In 2021 the government announced its 'New Plan for Immigration'. In 2022, its Nationality and Borders Act was passed, and then, in 2023, the Illegal Migration Act, both of which expanded the grounds for immigration detention and deportation and have further curtailed people's ability to appeal against either. These pieces of legislation have inhibited people's right to claim asylum, and to access other legal protections including judicial review. Indeed, the Illegal

Migration Act excludes those who ‘arrive illegally’ from asylum protections altogether, while placing a duty on the home secretary to remove them. It has also established that the home secretary, rather than the courts, may determine whether a period of immigration detention is reasonable.

Although delivered by the private sector, deportation, detention and transportation are strictly controlled and governed by the Home Office. Other state actors are also involved, including official human rights monitors from His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) and the Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB). During my research, His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) trained the private sector agents in use of force and monitored its application on certain flights. The line between public and private is blurred not just through these institutional practices, but in the contract itself, which sets out a complex system of ‘service credits’, or fines, for both parties. Representatives from Mitie and the Home Office consult one another in daily and weekly meetings to manage practical questions and disputes around timings, logistics and capacity.

Even when staff from the two sectors disagree or fall into conflict, they do so under tightly constrained circumstances, and their interdependence is commonly acknowledged and verbally reinforced by representatives from both sides. ‘We have been working together and we have had success because of our new motto, “Every removal counts”’, a senior manager from Mitie announced at the end of a fractious meeting in November 2020. ‘Thanks to our Home Office colleagues. We do appreciate and we will continue to provide what we all want—a first class escorting service.’ One month later, the same individual was more succinct: ‘We work best when we work together,’ he reminded everyone after a heated session filled with disagreement over who was to blame, and thus who had to pay, for some recent failed deportations. At a more equanimous assembly the following year, a Home Office employee whose job was to ensure the contract was successfully delivered ended with these words: ‘I just want [to say] thanks to Care & Custody. It’s been a very difficult time, with lots of chopping and changing and charters. I’d just like to say thank you to the escort teams and management.’

In these statements, we catch of a glimpse of how the pursuit of border control, like many other large-scale infrastructure projects, is a shared public–private endeavour.³⁰ We also see the limitations of the contract as a tool for accountability.³¹ This form of sovereign power, delivered in conjunction with, and through the efforts of, the private sector, endures and expands even when border control fails, not just because Mitie shields the state from blame, but because the system itself, like all logistics, has failure and waste built into it as recurring costs on the balance sheet.³² Contracts, after all, manage risk by allocating responsibility; they do not seek to eradicate it.

A Methodological Note: On the Ethics of Observation

It took me a long time to obtain permission to do this study. Access required agreement first from the Home Office and then, from the private contractor. Although I had strong working relationships with both, following years of research inside Britain's immigration removal centres, the key institutional buy-in from the Home Office only began after the publication of Stephen Shaw's 2016 report on the *Welfare of Vulnerable People in Detention*, which raised concerns about the escort process.³³ Even then, verbal agreements failed to materialise into a start date for the fieldwork.

First there was the delay caused by the 2017 tendering process during which Mitie Care & Custody replaced Tascor. It would not be 'fair' or 'relevant' to study the work of an outgoing company, I was advised. My Home Office contact said I had to allow the new contractor time to 'bed-in.' The company was unable to agree a start date with me for the research, one of my corporate contacts informed me, because 'the mobilisation is really ramping up' and they needed 'to keep focussed on key deliverables', rather than on facilitating an academic study.

By the summer of 2018, I thought the project would never happen, and so I began to concentrate on an alternative study of Brook House Immigration Removal Centre.³⁴ However, after an unexpected and informal invitation to afternoon tea, I was summoned to London. That meeting led to a joint session with representatives from Mitie. Finally, in July 2019, I received the go-ahead to study all aspects of the immigration escorting contract, from the detention areas at ports and airports, to the transportation vans, court holding rooms, residential facilities, and charter and scheduled flights.

Eight months into what was designed to be a twenty-four-month project,³⁵ the field research came to a sudden halt due to COVID-19. Other than a few visits over the summer of 2020 to Dover and to the overseas escorting headquarters in London, I moved the project entirely online to avoid contagion. From March 2020 to June 2021, rather than watching officers bundle people onto a plane or march them into a van, I observed logistics meetings on Microsoft Teams, as managers planned the days and weeks ahead. I logged onto the regular contract monitoring meetings between the company and the Home Office. I was also invited to observe a dispute resolution between the union for the overseas escorts and their employer, facilitated by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS).

While I always took care to turn my camera on at the start of these meetings, to greet people and remind them of my presence, most sessions took place with everyone's cameras off. This arrangement may have created some ambiguity about my role, not least because my note-taking was not visible as it would have

been were we in a room together. There was also less opportunity for other participants to ask me questions, or for me to seek clarification.

In December 2020, I recorded these concerns in my fieldnotes. ‘I began with my camera on,’ I wrote, ‘so they’d see me. I was trying to make sure they all realised I was there, but I was told to turn it off. It all feels a bit murky observing these meetings online,’ I worried, ‘because nobody really knows I’m here. Or, more importantly, why I’m here.’ In fact, in that December meeting, and in most others, the chair greeted me, and drew attention to my presence; I was also often asked, like any other member of the committee, whether I had ‘any other business.’ Sometimes the chair invited the other members to introduce themselves and explain their role to help me understand their job.

Even so, it was with some relief that, in July 2021, I finally returned to in-person research, albeit slowly and cautiously. Unfortunately, the eighteen-month disruption caused by the pandemic had left a mark. Some of the ties I had made had to be rebuilt; staff had resigned, and, in any case the system had changed in response to COVID-19 and due to the significant increase in the numbers of people arriving in Dover. As a result, the project continued for another two years, far longer than I had originally planned, squeezed around my other professional and domestic duties.

Well before the pandemic, I had struggled to identify or build meaningful rapport with many participants. The lack of a clear timetable and the distinct spatial arrangements of the holding units and detainee transportation made these sites and practices difficult to study. Unlike my previous experiences in immigration removal centres and prisons, where there is always a private place to meet people, and where the routine gives each day a structure of sorts, I found it hard to strike up relationships with more than a handful of key informants. Instead, I relied on non-participant observation, which allowed for informal and unstructured discussions with over two hundred people as they were performing their duties, without necessarily helping me get to know them well. In addition to those informal, unstructured conversations, I conducted more than fifty formal interviews, most of which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also gathered 170 surveys, which I administered at the end of the project between May and August 2023. Everywhere I went, I jotted down notes in an exercise book, and at the end of the day I would record longer reflections about what I had seen and heard.

Although I mainly worked alone, sometimes I was assisted by a researcher: in 2019 for the first few months of the project, Samuel Singler visited parts of the in-country escorting system in Northern Ireland and came with me to various meetings, training sessions and other locations in mainland Britain. He spent a day with escorts in a van, visited short-term holding centres and observed one charter flight from start to finish. In 2021 Vicky Taylor

accompanied me on a series of visits to Dover and northern France. Like me, they both took detailed fieldnotes, some of which appear in the following pages. For ease of reading, I do not differentiate between their words and mine. A third researcher, Laura Haas, helped design the survey and conducted its statistical analysis.

While I found it to be impossible to spend time in every site covered by the contract, I included as wide a range as possible. I thus visited seventeen of the thirty-one short-term holding facilities and holding units in operation at the time in airports, ports, immigration tribunals and reporting centres. Some I attended multiple times, others just once. I observed staff in vans and vehicle bases, at the headquarters of the in-country and overseas escorting services, and during collections for and boardings of charter flights and scheduled flights. I participated in their initial training and refresher courses. Mitie personnel were made aware of my project and invited to participate in it via group emails, and the research design was authorised by University of Oxford's ethical review board.³⁶ At the end of the project, an invitation to complete the survey through an online link was sent to everyone.

In addition to the fieldwork, I was shown and often given documents and internal records to better understand the business. Separately, I gathered rules, handbooks, annual financial statements and reports produced by the Home Office and the company. Some of this material is unpublished. Although it was provided to me in full knowledge of my position as an academic researcher, I am constrained in my ability to freely report all the details from these documents by data protection regulations, corporate confidentiality and, on occasion, by their security classification. Such matters are complicated not only legally, but ethically as well, since once in possession of the information I could not 'un-know' it. The data and reports, just as much as the meetings and practices I observed, or the conversations and interviews I conducted, helped me to understand and map the system. In their material nature, as files, documents and paperwork, as well in their empirical content, they illuminated and made concrete the bureaucratic, and above all the logistical, character and nature of this form of border control.

Initially, I had planned to observe whole flights from start to finish and to spend weeks at a time in a selection of detention sites. However, it soon became apparent that I had over-estimated my capacity to cope with the physical and moral demands of this project, as well as the time and travel that it would involve. There were many practical challenges, that were exacerbated by my teaching and administrative duties in Oxford, as well as my domestic responsibilities and, of course, by the pandemic. Overseas escorts, for example, typically 'muster', like soldiers, for flights in the middle of the night. That is followed by a lengthy process all of which occurs well before the plane takes

off. 'It depends on how the collection goes,' explained Andrea,³⁷ before my first observation of a charter flight in November 2019. 'Sometimes, it's click, click, click. No problem. But if they have to deal with large quantities of disruption, it can take longer. Normally I want coaches at the airport two hours before departure, although since this is a charter flight we can do what we want.' Most of the sites of short-term detention are far from Oxford and, with their transient populations and lack of daily regime, did not invite sustained visits.

Staying up all night for a deportation was exhausting. Watching people being restrained and forced onto a plane was upsetting and unsettling. I worried about the ethics of observing their distress, when I had nothing to offer them in return, and no way of assisting them or even explaining my presence during this difficult time. More prosaic, but also difficult for me, was that I had two teenage children at home and a husband who works elsewhere. I could not leave my daughters alone for long. And so, in the end, I decided not to fly. Instead, I watched the preparation, collection and boarding procedures, before exiting the plane. That was as much as I could manage.

Less dramatically, I also had to limit the time I spent in the vans due to travel sickness. Particularly once COVID-19 began, there was not always room for me anyway. Usually, two officers sit in the front of the vehicle; the driver and a colleague whose job is to record various pieces of information throughout the shift and communicate as needed with the passenger(s). While, in principle, three people can fit, there is very little room and it felt awkward. Under these circumstances, I opted, after a few ride-alongs, to meet in vehicle bases instead, where I could talk to officers before or after they went for a drive. Others, who had heard about the research project, approached me individually. Still others I encountered in the detention sites, as they were dropping detained people off or picking them up. Quite a few of those I spoke to about the vans were employed in other roles when we met, but had spent some of their earlier career 'on the road', as this job is known.

This project was not just practically difficult, but emotionally draining too. Despite my years of studying sites of custody, I found the empirical components to be unexpectedly challenging from the start. In an early piece of fieldwork, designed to meet a new cohort of employees, I decided to take part in their use of force training, which was then provided by the prison service at the National Tactical Response Group (NTRG) headquarters in Kidlington, outside Oxford. There, private sector recruits are taught how to restrain people and force them onto a plane and into a van.

The NTRG buildings are adjacent to and in view of the local immigration detention centre, Campsfield House, where I had previously conducted extensive research and which had recently been shut (fig. 1).³⁸ As I recorded in my fieldnotes, 'I have heard loud noises from this site on and off for the past

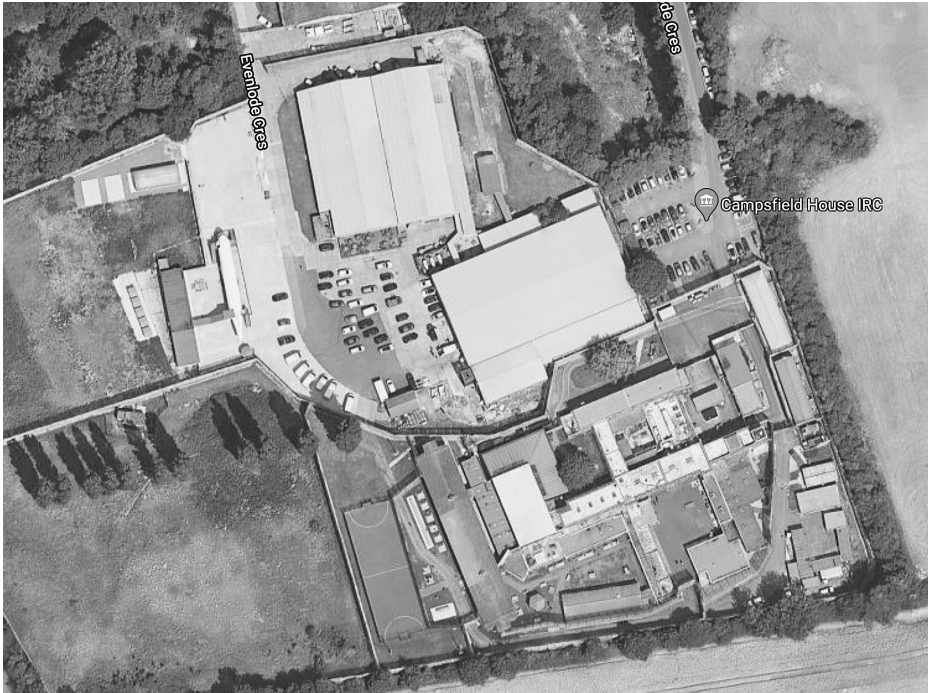


FIGURE 1. Google Maps image of NTRG headquarters, Kidlington (the large central buildings). The fuselage used for training is on the left, and Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centre can be seen in the lower right quarter.

10 years, dogs barking, batons smashing against the wall, and yelling. I never knew how to get in or really what it was.’ That first day, I wrote,

I was a bit nervous, not least because I had to wear weird sports gear, including [my daughter’s] tracksuit. I didn’t know where to go or who was my point of contact. I also didn’t know how to get in through the big metal gate. Luckily the guy in the van behind me believed me (‘normally I should ask for ID’ he said), and punched in the code. I was later given the code by a member of staff who cheerily remarked—‘Don’t tell anyone I gave it to you.’

On entering the grounds, I parked next to a plane fuselage, on which the faded airline brand name ‘Meridiana’ was still dimly visible (fig. 2). Internally the aircraft was divided into three areas: a classroom behind the cockpit; an administrator’s office in the middle; and rows of seating at the back into which staff would later practice forcing and carrying one another on board.



FIGURE 2. The decommissioned plane used for use of force training. Photo courtesy of Grant Robinson/Oxford Aviation Group.

HOMES training starts, like many other inductions, with a day of PowerPoint slides and short video presentations. I entered the classroom via the metal staircase that had been fixed to the front of the plane, pushing open the original aircraft door. Signs on the other side urged everyone to ‘please keep plane door closed to prevent birds entering’. The sessions over the next three days took place in a padded room built behind the plane, called the ‘dojo’. There are additional rooms which have been designed to the scale and shape of the interior of the custodial vans.

The rest of the NTRG training site is enclosed in a corrugated iron building. There, the same trainers instruct prison officers in a slightly different set of techniques known as ‘Control and Restraint’ (C&R), using stage-set prison yards, housing blocks and cells. The noises that I had heard over the years came from their role playing, as they were taught to respond to a prison riot, or, as official language would express it, ‘concerted indiscipline’.

When I asked John what it was like to teach the Mitie DCOs, he was quick to differentiate them from the prison service personnel. ‘It’s hard to gee them up,’ he complained. ‘They’re not like prison officers. Some of them have never used

force before! They don't even realise it's part of their job. When we get prison officers here, they already know. They see it on TV and in movies. They know that's part of their job.' To the extent that this is true, the new recruits would soon be disabused of any such notion. The curriculum emphasises the likelihood of violence from the beginning: 'Older people have thin skin,' the training package warns. 'They bruise and tear more easily'; and, 'Pregnant women find it hard to breathe.' In the classes I observed, the instructors drove the matter home: 'Imagine the detainee is a bomb, and you're trying to stop him going off,' John urged. Or, somewhat less dramatically, 'If you don't hold his wrist like this [demonstrating the correct posture] he can punch you, and you're done.'

Staff are taught how to 'use force' in different scenarios, and everyone must take their turn at being restrained. In my notes I wrote, 'I have noticed that when the men are the "detainee" in the scenarios, their faces go blank. But when I ask them afterwards how it felt, they all shrug it off. "Oh it's comfortable," they say. [But] I actually ended up leaving when they broke for lunch because I wanted to cry.' That day, I had 'been the detainee.' 'Don't break the professor,' John and his colleagues urged everyone cheerily, before telling them to apply the waist restraint belt on me. 'It doesn't hurt,' they reassured me. 'It's comfortable.' 'It's soft.' I, however, was unconvinced. 'It is a fucking restraint belt,' my notes record angrily. 'And actually, when they put it on me, it dug into me. Because it has to be very tight around the waist, and the Velcro on the wrists is scratchy. And they were of course being very gentle. So just imagine how it must feel when they are not.' The men were then told to add leg restraints: 'they tipped me back and carried me. A couple of times. It was uncomfortable and intimidating. All very fleshy and close. And they smelled really bad [. . .] Today was a hard day [. . .]. I stayed for 4 hours and then left.'

This was only a training session, and everyone was as careful as possible when they were paired with me. Yet, I found the experience to be painful, even if it did not hurt physically. In that regard, this early piece of fieldwork encapsulated much of what was to come. For while I did witness some moments of actual violence, during boardings and collections for the charter and scheduled flights, for the most part the brutality was more subtle. The sound of a crying baby in a holding unit; rows and rows of plastic bags, piled high on the ground, labelled with boat numbers that corresponded to the tags placed on people's wrists; descriptions of oil fumes that had made an officer's eyes water when she took custody of the people who had been driven up from Dover on a coach; reception staff in an immigration removal centre handing over parkas and beanies to men who were being deported in winter, and had nobody to meet them and nowhere to stay; people crying or shouting when they were detained in ports and airports; staff members' averted gaze; their banter, indifference, and casual dehumanisation.

Officers' lives could also be difficult. Some told me they struggled with literacy, due to dyslexia or simply because of limited education. In the survey, around half the respondents reported that they had left school aged sixteen or earlier. A disproportionate number reported regular thoughts of suicide and self-harm; many found it hard to sleep and were pessimistic about their future. Ethnic minority employees were the most adversely affected.³⁹

In conversations as well as interviews, some mentioned experiences of domestic violence either as children or from partners. Many spoke of multiple experiences of redundancy. Some referred to serious mental and physical health problems of their own or of their partners and children. Particularly outside the London metropolitan area, women and men suggested, this was the best job they could hope to find, a situation that not only made it very difficult for them to raise concerns if they had them, but also, arguably, militated against them dwelling on difficult questions about its nature or legitimacy.

Such experiences affected the project. Already burdened by the practical challenges—What is the best way to study a remote workforce? Could I really stay up all night to watch a deportation? How much time could I realistically spend in any one detention site within this sprawling, national, networked system of custody? What to do about the vans?—I also struggled with the ethics and emotional impact of observing processes many of which were painful for all involved. My fieldnotes are full of concerns about whether I was doing the study properly. In November 2019, I wrote about 'trying to figure out my own limits for fieldwork', noting that, 'It's not a great time of the year to be brave, because I am exhausted from the term.' Two years later, on my September 2021 visit to Dover, I was still worried. 'The Mitie staff were joking with me that I should have stayed overnight last night in the Premier Inn and I could have hung out with them and, you know, if I was a real ethnographer, I would have, but I just absolutely couldn't face it. Because I can really only do this for brief periods of time,' I wrote. 'It's so depressing, but also [. . .] it's physically tiring because all the sites are far away. I end up having to drive miles wherever I go in this research, [. . .] I'm actually a bit knackered. So, I don't always remember and today, I know, again, like I feel as though somebody said something important which I have forgotten.'

'The only way I can really manage this research project', I went on, 'is probably not so dissimilar to the way the staff manage their job, which is to break it down into little elements, focus on process. I try and keep my eyes open and my ears listening, and sort of squirrel what I see and hear away.' My working assumption was that I was 'managing' my feelings in ways that mirrored how those I was studying approached their daily work. As the next chapter will show, Mitie personnel are required to record painful expressions of violence, frustration and despair as data points, alongside banal issues like room temperature and menu choice. In so doing, they convert complex moral and

personal matters into measurable units, thereby creating the infrastructure of a system that denies not only their own complicity, feelings, views, but also the experiences of those they detain and deport.

Border Control as Labour

From the site of first arrival, whether at the port of Dover after a dangerous trip across the Channel on a dinghy from northern France, or at an airport, people subject to immigration control are shuttled around the country and occasionally onto planes. The private sector agents who form the focus of this book and who work at the behest of the Home Office are their escorts, transferring them between prisons, short-term holding facilities and immigration removal centres, reporting centres and immigration tribunals, police cells, hospitals, embassies and airports.

These institutions make up the physical infrastructure of the border control supply chain. These secure sites, like similar ones elsewhere, are used not only to incapacitate people, but to sort through them, place them in circulation and, above all, to keep them out of sight.⁴⁰ If their ‘residents’, the ‘migrants’, provide the raw content for the ensuing logistical supply chain, the detainee custody escort officers are the ones who operate it for their government ‘customer’.

Although a small number of staff had previously worked in prisons or in the police, most had no prior experience of custodial work. Instead, their employment histories ranged widely and defied easy characterisation. Many men had toiled in manual jobs and trades including coal mining, carpentry, building, metalworking, airplane refuelling and butchery. Others, like Alicia, who was based in a holding unit in the north of England when I met her, had previously relied on Universal Credit from the government and what she referred to as ‘agency work’, paid on zero-hours contracts. Her stint in a DPD warehouse, which distributes packages (rather than people) across the country, had been particularly hard, she recalled, shuddering. The work had been physically demanding, fast-paced, repetitive and driven by targets. She had not lasted in it for long.

Still others had experience on the factory floor in industries from meat packing to chemical plants, while a significant proportion had worked in the transport sector, including driving trucks, ambulances and courier vans. Indeed, some continued in those posts alongside their role at Mitie. Especially during the periods of national lockdown in 2020 and 2021, many overseas escorts took on second (zero-hours contract) jobs driving for Uber, Amazon or Deliveroo to supplement their salaries and fill their time when the planes were grounded and borders were shut.

The night-time economy was another common precursor to immigration detainee escorting. Some Mitie employees had previously managed pubs or worked in their kitchens. Other had poured the drinks behind the bar. Men had

often ‘worked the doors,’ employed as bouncers at nightclubs and other venues. Women, by contrast, were more likely to have been home-makers, or to have worked in the privatised care sector, looking after the elderly and the unwell.

Overseas escorts had often held previous jobs in the airport, as ground staff, airport security, baggage handlers, or even as cabin crew, having been let go at the height of the pandemic when COVID-19 greatly reduced the demand for leisure and business air travel. ‘It’s not much different,’ they claimed when I expressed surprise at this career shift, before recounting stories of drunk, difficult passengers who needed to be subdued. Overseas escorts seemed to be more likely than others elsewhere in the contract to have served in the military, although less so than in the past, I was told. Official statistics are unavailable, but Mitie, like the prison service, has signed up to the armed forces covenant, recruiting former servicemen and women.⁴¹

There were also a handful of people who had university degrees, almost always in criminology. For them, and for some others, escorting was seen as a step on the way to a better job. ‘It’s good experience isn’t it, for the police, or for Border Force?’⁴² It looks good on a CV, I was frequently assured.

Most of those I interviewed had been made redundant at least once before. Some were sacked by Mitie during the research project, while many more left of their own volition. ‘Staff attrition,’ as it is called, characterises the sector, as well as people’s previous experiences of paid work.

While senior managers emphasise efficiency and value for money, their uniformed colleagues, who are paid far less, routinely complain about low pay, long shifts and poor working conditions. Everyone, as far as possible, avoids discussing the needs or experiences of the men, women and children whom they confine or forcibly move, unless pressed to do so. In their accounts of the target(s) of their work, gendered and racialised tropes of danger, risk and desert are sometimes neutralised by individual exceptions, when a particular person, often a child, or a mother, catches their sympathy. In these examples, as well as in the routinisation of their daily tasks, officers effectively deny, or the very least manage to overlook, the violence at the heart of this system, and of their job.

Like other supply chain workers, staff are both a liability for the company and disposable—easily replaced. These precarious workers need few qualifications and can be trained reasonably quickly, partly on the job. Their salaries remain modest, even though during the research period they did increase. Many grow tired of the shift patterns and the long days and nights; they complain about a lack of respect from their managers and the public. Over the course of the study, their numbers dropped alongside the deportation rate, while more and more people arrived in Dover in search of sanctuary. Since taking on the contract, the company has altered the terms and conditions of labour, on the one hand raising wages across the board, while on the other

removing additional payments for those who enforce deportations. Although ‘in-country escorting’ and ‘overseas escorting’ are distinct, staff members are often cross-posted or offered work on their days off to fulfil operational needs.

Such examples capture another important aspect of border control: its permanently temporary nature. The ‘solutions’ provided by the private sector often appear to be hastily cobbled together despite the long-term nature of the policies and institutions that are created. There are few consequences of failure. Instead, the state invites and rewards innovation, no matter how ineffective, or, increasingly, how inhumane, or even unlawful, it may be. Some strategies are, no doubt, driven by financial concerns. From the temporary marquees erected at Manston to hold thousands of people arriving to seek asylum, who thus live in tents rather than buildings, to the dilapidated rooms within airports and tribunals and the uncomfortable vans that often break down, the escorting system relies on and promotes familiar neoliberal practices and logics. While workers, and those whom they guard and transport, are offered minimal comforts, senior managers and the company’s shareholders turn a tidy profit.

Conclusion: Border Control Infrastructure and Logistics

In an early presentation on this study at the University of Oslo, an audience member asked me how I would address the possibility that practices driven by demands for efficiency or profit might be experienced by someone detained as punitive. Even if this system operates without the trappings of the prison, she demanded, was it not simply another form of punishment?

Similar questions, I think, could be usefully asked about the impacts of race and gender on those subject to border control. Logistics, or, more precisely, ‘logistification’, as Jesse LeCavalier observed in his study of Walmart, ‘works to flatten, connect, smooth, and lubricate as it organizes material both space and time.’⁴³ Yet, people cannot be flattened or smoothed. Their social, psychological and physical characteristics, as well as their degree of English language proficiency, and demeanour, not to mention how many of them are detained, are not irrelevant either to how they are ‘organised’ by this system, or to how they are treated and understood by its operatives.

As subsequent chapters will show, there are direct legal and institutional connections between immigration detainee escorting and the criminal justice system, and workers sometimes conceived of their role in terms of security and crime control. Likewise, even though few were openly racist in front of me, they routinely differentiated between people on the basis of race, age and gender, as they operated a system designed to exclude foreigners. More prosaically, they tended to be more sympathetic to those with whom they could communicate easily.

The tensions between these elements lie at the heart of the system, and of this book. On the one hand, as a senior manager told me at our very first meeting, ‘this is a logistics business’, like DPD, Amazon or any other of the familiar firms who deliver products to our homes each day. On the other hand, as staff frequently pointed out, ‘people are not packages’. There are other contradictions. In-country and overseas escorts are allowed to use force and sometimes do. Yet the system seeks to operate with minimal violence; it is best if people agree to go. Forcing them to leave is time consuming and risky. Although officers restrict people’s liberty, the system has no interest in punishment as such. The nature of those in custody cannot be changed—they are always already foreign. They can neither be reformed nor integrated.⁴⁴ In any case, nobody should be held anywhere for long. These sites of detention facilitate circulation. The people who are detained are simply deemed to belong elsewhere, and the system is designed to return them there.

In making sense of such matters, this book maps the distinct logistical processes and spaces as well as the connections between them. Chapter 1 begins with the technical decision-making and data-gathering that underpins and facilitates the system, highlighting from the start the interdependence between the private and public sectors. From these administrative practices, I move in chapter 2 to Dover, a key point of entry and an increasingly important site of detention. In chapter 3 I explore the other kinds of short-term holding facilities that constitute the built infrastructure. In chapter 4 I describe the processes of transporting people around the UK, while chapters 5 and 6 focus on enforced removals. For every site and process, I document the reliance on bureaucracy and the potential for violence. I show that, as in all supply chains, this system has failure built into it.

Separately and together, these constitutive parts of the border control supply chain transform people’s humanity, both symbolically and in concrete ways, through administrative processes and bureaucracy, into monetised, measurable units. The contract determines responsibility and apportions a financial value to such ‘failures’ as a delay, an escape, an aborted flight, a death in custody. It likewise strives for economic ‘efficiencies’, keeping pay low and working conditions poor. The risks of dehumanisation are high, not only for the people who are moved like packages, but also for the workers who are employed to do the moving. In my Conclusion, I assess the moral and political consequences of this system, while also offering suggestions for how to work towards alternative, inclusive infrastructures. It is hard to be optimistic, under current conditions, when the UK government seems intent on undoing legal protections and safeguards not just for foreign citizens, but for its own as well. Yet, as this study also shows, the stakes are high for us all, and so we have to try.

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