

Inquiry confirms brutal repression at UK's Brook House detention centre but provides no redress

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The report of a public inquiry into conditions at Brook House immigration removal centre in Sussex, England, lifts the lid on the savagery deployed by successive Labour and Tory governments in their detention of migrants.

Brook House immigration removal centre (IRC) opened in March 2009 under Gordon Brown's Labour government to hold 448 detainees, with the capacity increased to 508 in 2017. It is located in the grounds of Gatwick, one of the main airports serving London.

Private security company G4S ran the centre from March 2009, with its contract extended in 2018 to end in May 2020. In that month, another outsourcing company, Serco, took over after winning a tendering contract worth up to £260 million over 10 years—which also included nearby Tinsley House.

The inquiry was prompted by a BBC *Panorama* programme in September 2017, “Under-Cover: Britain's Immigration Secrets”, which broadcast undercover footage of brutal abuse of detainees by detention officers. The outcry at the time forced G4S to suspend a nurse, six detention custody officers and two managers, and to place five other members of staff on restricted duties pending investigation.

A subsequent report by HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that incidents of self-harm had significantly increased at Brook House, with 40 percent of detainees saying they had felt suicidal at some point while in the centre.

A public inquiry, which this week's report is the conclusion of, was launched in November 2019. It had a very limited remit, being set up to investigate “mistreatment of individuals who were detained at Brook House IRC between 1 April 2017 and 31 August 2017”, and seeking only “to understand what happened at Brook

House IRC, to identify learning and to make recommendations that would help to prevent a recurrence of such events.” It had no powers of prosecution.

Under the terms of the Brook House Inquiry, “mistreatment ... is interpreted to mean treatment contrary to Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, namely torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Inquiry chair Kate Eves writes in the executive summary of “19 incidents in which there was credible evidence of acts or omissions that were capable of amounting to mistreatment ‘contrary to Article 3’”. She added it was of significant concern that, within a limited time frame [five months], I identified 19 such incidents.”

One of the worst, “was the moment Detention Custody Officer (DCO) Ioannis (Yan) Paschali placed his hands firmly around the neck of one detained person (referred to by the Inquiry as D1527), leaned forward over him and said in a quiet voice: ‘You fucking piece of shit, because I’m going to put you to fucking sleep.’”

Other incidents “included the repeated use of an inherently dangerous restraint technique, which has previously been associated with the death of a detained man, Jimmy Mubenga, in 2010”.

Mubenga had been detained at Brook House prior to deportation to Angola. In 2013, an inquest jury found that he was unlawfully killed by three G4S security guards. Pinned down in a plane seat by G4S guards, Mubenga shouted, “I can’t breathe” and “You’re killing me”.

According to the inquiry report, detainees were choked, abused, forced naked from their cells and forced to share dirty, poorly ventilated cells and with unscreened toilets. Staff used “abusive, racist and derogatory language” and confronted detainees with riot shields and balaclavas. The inquiry “saw footage of occasions where staff, talking

about a detained person, used the phrase if ‘he dies, he dies’”.

G4S made millions overseeing this abuse, avoiding even any financial sanction.

A 2019 report by the National Audit Office (NAO) found that “The Home Office pays G4S around £13 million a year through a fixed monthly fee with deductions for performance failures.”

It went on, “The abuses documented in BBC’s September 2017 Panorama were not a contractual breach and did not lead to substantial penalties under the contract. Under the contract, the Home Office can only award deductions for specific incidents of underperformance. Inappropriate use of force or verbal abuse of detainees are not counted as a performance failure under the contract.”.

Furthermore, the “Home Office concluded that the behaviour depicted in Panorama did not constitute evidence of systemic failures or a material breach of the contract and that it was not necessary to try to terminate G4S’s contract”.

While the inquiry compiled masses of evidence and produced an 800-page report—providing just a snapshot of the inhumane practices rife throughout a system for the imprisonment and deportation of the vulnerable—it does nothing to challenge this set-up. The *Times* noted, “A lawyer representing people who were held at Brook House had told the inquiry the centre should be shut down, but Eves stopped short of calling for it to close.”

Her conclusion is extremely tame: “Under the Home Office and its contractor G4S, Brook House was not sufficiently decent, secure or caring for detained people or its staff at the time these events took place. An environment flourished in which unacceptable treatment became more likely.”

Eves half acknowledges the futility of the whole affair. “My report comes as the latest in a long line of reports and investigations into immigration detention—many, with depressing regularity, making broadly similar findings and recommendations. It has long since been time to act on recommendations, rather than simply keep repeating them.”

More and more people are at risk of this abuse. Brook House is one of 10 immigration removal centres across Britain, including Harmondsworth, near Heathrow, the largest detention centre in Europe that can hold up to 630 people. Eves notes, “When I was commissioned to conduct this Inquiry, the use of immigration detention was falling and a number of immigration removal centres had

been closed. The government has made clear its intention to expand the use of immigration detention.”

The bankruptcy of the inquiry is summed up by the main recommendation that immigration removal detainees be held for no more than 28 days.

Even this will be ignored by the Conservative government, which is only interested in intensifying the oppression of migrants. Under its newly passed Illegal Migration Act, migrants can be detained indefinitely, with the timeframe at the discretion of what the home secretary of the day deems “reasonably necessary”.

The Tories’ agenda is shared by all the main parliamentary parties. Labour

Party shadow immigration minister Stephen Kinnock said some of the evidence put before the inquiry was “utterly harrowing”, showing that the Tories had “delivered neither control nor compassion”. But only in August Kinnock committed Labour to keeping the entirety of the migrant detention system in place, including using barges and former military bases, newly opened by the government.

In the weeks since, party leader Sir Keir Starmer has sought to position Labour even further to right on immigration policy. In response to government claims that Labour in office would oversee 100,000 extra migrant arrivals to the UK—under a European Union-wide migrant quota scheme—Starmer dismissed this as “complete garbage”.

He told the *Sun* newspaper “strong borders are non-negotiable” because “they exist to protect us and those we love from harm.” He told Sky News presenter Trevor Phillips that he favoured a policy of “smashing” smuggling gangs and would respond to the arrival of small boats over the Channel with anti-terror legislation. Those who know of a crossing but do not report it—for example, family members already in the UK—would be guilty under such legislation, “bracketed as terrorists” in Starmer’s words.



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