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VIRTUAL PRIVATE PRISONS

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By Craig Paterson.

VIRTUAL PRIVATE PRISONS

Electronic tagging was sold as a cheaper alternative to filling up Britain's prisons. Has it worked? Yes - for the shareholders of private security companies.

Since the 1980s the British government has actively promoted the role of the private security industry within criminal justice. Privately run prisons, Young Offender Institutes (YOI) and prisoner transport systems are now acknowledged components of the criminal justice landscape. Added to this, new immigration detention centres are being opened and run by commercial organisations alongside their crime control interests.

The electronic tagging of offenders, and in some cases asylum seekers, is another growing area of public sector privatisation. First used in 1989, between 10,000 and 11,000 people are now subject to a variety of forms of electronic monitoring (EM) at any one time across England and Wales. In 2004-05 EM curfew orders were used in 53,000 cases and cost the Home Office a total of £102.3 million.

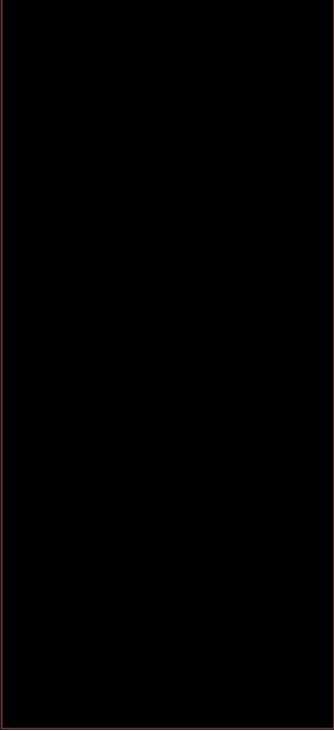
This money was spread between Group 4 Securicor, Premier-Serco and Reliance Monitoring Services, although Reliance has subsequently left the EM market. Group 4 Securicor is the second largest security provider across the world, with 360,000 employees operating in more than 100 countries. Group 4 Securicor run Parc prison and Oakhill Secure Training Centre (STC) and are the world's largest EM provider, monitoring almost 35,000 people at any one time. Premier-Serco runs four adult prisons, one YOI and one STC plus 40% of EM in England and Wales and the whole of the Scottish market. Further involvement with hospitals, defence, air traffic control, the railways and the police demonstrates the breadth of Premier-Serco's involvement in privatised public services in the UK.

Group 4 Falck, Securicor, Premier Custodial Group, Serco, Global Solutions Limited and UK Detention Services are the recurring names that compete for contracts in the criminal justice market. Despite the appearance of competition, a tangled and incestuous web of ever-changing names and relationships exists, through which the same organisations constantly reappear, both at a national and a global level. A world market in the expansion of social control has been created. Politicians claimed that privatising criminal justice would reduce the financial burden on central government, yet it has produced the opposite result – an expansion of both commercial and governmental forms of crime control, undertaken by less accountable and less transparent institutions. Electronic tagging is symbolic of this shift. It has not become a genuine alternative to custody, but simply led to increased surveillance of community penalties.

Politics, in particular the ideology of privatisation, has driven the development of EM. There have been more than half a dozen official evaluations of EM curfew orders, almost all of them conducted by government researchers, yet none of them have found clear evidence of its effectiveness. When evidence on EM has not been positive it has been ignored by policy makers. The dual political and commercial drive behind electronic monitoring presents clear problems with regard to lines of accountability. As Michael Matheson of the Scottish National Party acknowledged, these are commercial organisations 'answering to shareholders rather than elected representatives, so there is no way of the company being held to account on the services it provides'. In the absence of any independent regulation, accountability only exists in the form of commercial contracts between the Home Office and the contractors. This presents clear issues concerning the equitable and transparent delivery of justice when the government and commercial organisations have mutual interests. This was acknowledged in the National Audit Office report (2006) recommendations that encouraged the Home Office to 'be more rigorous in the regular audits it conducts with the contractor'.

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England and Wales has the largest electronic monitoring system in Europe as well as the highest proportion of prisoners in privately run prisons. The probation service is also being opened up to 'contestability' and a 'mixed economy' of service provision. Together, these developments in privatised criminal justice constitute a 'corrections-commercial complex' through which multi-national conglomerates increasingly influence criminal justice policy. Whilst the demand for technological solutions to social problems arises within government, the solutions are designed and subsequently marketed by the manufacturers.

This makes it easy for politicians and law enforcement agencies to be distracted by technological potential. This was the case with satellite tracking, which the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, was marketing to the public as a 'virtual prison' before the technology was sufficiently robust to even satisfy the manufacturers. The populist ambitions of successive Home Secretaries, coupled with the expansionist drive of commerce, present clear threats to the delivery of justice. Electronic monitoring has been introduced and lauded without any clear evidence to indicate what it actually achieves, just as with CCTV and the Newham facial recognition project. With the current piloting of satellite tracking presenting a further intensification of surveillance capabilities, it is essential to understand the actual aims of these crime control technologies and not simply to be dazzled by the commercial and political marketing machines that sell them to the public.

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