

Refugees as Business

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Despair breeds profits; disturbances supply opportunity. The genius and venal nature of human nature will always see a possible buck from an impossibly cruel situation. Globally, a study should be done about how many billions goes into the supply of contracts, tenders and sweetheart deals to companies with a hand in the business of stopping and keeping refugees. They are the modern pimps of a distinctly modern market, and it pays to have a series of companies doing the work for governments.

All too often, the traffickers are saddled with the lion's share of the blame. Ignored are the equally vicious exploiters who find form in privately contracted companies. In some ways, they have even less of a case to make: the right to seek asylum is recognised by the UN Convention on Refugees; the means to facilitate how that is done is a matter that has been seized upon by practitioners in the market.

In Europe, companies such as European Homecare and ORS Service have shown themselves indifferent and, in some cases, openly hostile, to the welfare of inmates and guards. The [words](#) of Marie Sallnäs of Stockholm University remain relevant in describing the entire basis of private sector providers when it comes to dealing with refugee arrivals: "cowboys who are only there because they want to make heaps of money."

Australia storms ahead in these stakes. Its officials pay the very people smugglers they condemn to take their trafficked goods elsewhere; it has fed a security complex that would make its Anglo forefathers proud (think the reaction of the British Empire to the Boers in South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century; think, dare it be said, concentration and concentrated camps).

The "can-do" country of innovative cruelty has been adding a host of ideas to the mix on how best to tackle those incorrigibles arriving by sea. To that end, contracts have been awarded to various outfits with a good patina of near as to be criminality. The contractor Paladin is the most recent upstart in this venture, having received, through a closed-tender process, a range of contracts worth \$A423 million for 22 months of work. It had been receiving \$A17 million a month to provide security at three refugee centres located on Manus Island.

The company itself has a curious Australian address: 134 Nepean Esplanade, an inconspicuous beach shack on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. It had only registered in Australia a month before winning a \$A89 million contract to provide security services. Importantly, Paladin is interested in the grand squeeze, ensuring that the cost for each detainee, minus the actual comfort they receive, exceeds a [daily rate](#) twice that for a five-star hotel suite with Sydney Harbour views. In that sense, the Australian tax payer and detainee are given a right royal rogering.

The company itself has done its best to step into the shade. Founder Craig Thrupp has had a good time of it [failing](#) in delivering his contracts, accumulating a set of bad debts in Asia. (Paladin had been previously known as High Risk Security Asia Pacific, a name oddly appropriate for anybody wishing to do deals with it.) It has been reported to be running an office out of a beach shack on Kangaroo Island, a classic imposture demonstrating that illegitimate asylum seekers are less relevant than legitimate crooks who know how to cook the books for ruthlessly indifferent governments.

It is an appropriate reminder of another fiasco that took place in the United Kingdom at the end of last year: a ferry contract awarded to a company with no boats. More digging suggested favours and turning, rather conspicuously, a blind eye. Paladin's questionable competence in providing security services does not match the guile evident in [moving assets](#) offshore: some 12,000 shares in Paladin Aus finding their way from the Hong Kong holding to its Singapore registered Paladin Holdings Pte Ltd. The security side of the venture is evidently less relevant than the inventive tinkering of its accountants.

The Minister for Home Affairs, Peter Dutton, [has retreated](#).

"I've seen this criticism before in relation to closed contracts," he feebly explained to Sky News. "There are very few people who can deliver services in the middle of nowhere on an island that is so remote."

Stunning revelation. But it was one designed to avoid cabinet responsibility, a concept long lost in Australia's variant of the Westminster system. According to Dutton, the ones to be taken to task here were the "secretary of the department ultimately" or some delegated figure "within the department." Smell the confession.

Money is to be made, but Dutton is not claiming to be part of the scheme. His department, however, was not taking any chances. Anyone curious enough to investigate the issue using Australia's stunted Freedom of Information laws will find it interesting that the initial response from the Department of Home Affairs [precluded](#) FOI. That decision was reversed, but Paladin did not need to comply with standard procurement rule set out by Commonwealth guidelines. Backdoor easing comes to mind.

The Minister for Home Affairs begs to differ. Nothing to see here, Dutton suggests; move on. As Bernard Keane, [writing for Crikey](#), explains, there is much to see and more besides, so much so that a Royal Commission into the affairs of the Home Department might be necessary. And that would just be the start.

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