

Private firm loses detention centres contract

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Body

The controversial correctional company running the country's six immigration **detention centres** has unexpectedly **lost** its **contract**.

The Department of Immigration announced yesterday that while it had a general agreement with Australasian Correctional Management until 2008, its **contract** runs out in December and the department had refused another **contract** as it 'could not be satisfied that the offer represented best value for money'.

ACM, a subsidiary of an American correctional company, has had a troubled three years since first winning its **contract**, with riots, protests, escapes and claims of maltreatment of inmates a political embarrassment for Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock.

ACM runs the Woomera, Port Hedland, Villawood, Maribyrnong, Perth Airport and Curtin **detention centres**.

The Government is only legally able to re-tender for a new operator if ACM fails to meet certain criteria in this case cost.

Mr Ruddock said, 'We will be putting out to tender the contractual arrangements to see whether or not we are obtaining the best value for the Commonwealth [and] for taxpayers. That is what it is all about.'

Management of **detention centres** was 'a very difficult area' and he offered no direct criticism of ACM, saying the company would be expected to take part in the new tender.

But Labor's Immigration spokesman Con Sciacca and Justice spokesman Duncan Kerr said Mr Ruddock's decision vindicated Labor's calls for a judicial inquiry into the operation and privatisation of **detention centres**.

Labor has called on the Government not to complete the tender process until after the election with Mr Sciacca saying Labor would reconsider the privatisation of **detention centres** following the problems of accountability and transparency which were highlighted under ACM.

Refugee Council of Australia executive director Margaret Piper questioned whether conditions would improve under a new operator if they were given the same management brief.

'There are problems in the **centres** but we don't know where the seat of them is and the only way we will is through a judicial inquiry.'

Democrats immigration spokesman Andrew Bartlett said the move might be dollar-driven but the Government had little reason to be happy with ACM.

'It certainly can't be a good reflection on [the Government],' he said.

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'It's hard to see how you could be happy with something when that level of disturbance and concern is raised.'

Senator Bartlett also supported an inquiry before a new operator was given a major **contract**.

The Democrats this week joined with Labor in a plan to block a Government Bill to allow strip searches of children above the age of 10 as part of a major security crack-down unless a judicial inquiry was held.

Meanwhile, Mr Ruddock announced yesterday that 25 women and children would begin a \$1.5 million trial **detention** in a row of civilian houses in the South Australian township of Woomera.

Only volunteers who met strict health and character requirements would be accepted and they would be under 24-hour supervision by ACM staff with no unaccompanied movements beyond the house and yard.

Mr Ruddock said participants would have access to local schools and medical facilities, subject to consultation with government agencies, and would have maximum visitation with husbands and fathers back at the **detention centre**.

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