MONOPOLY BRITAIN AND THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

In 2010, soon after Kenneth Clarke became Secretary of State for Justice, the Ministry decided, for no apparent reason, to end the system whereby court interpreters (all of whom were freelancers) were hired through translation agencies working with the courts or directly by the courts themselves. It handed over the commissioning of all interpreters, lock, stock and barrel, to an obscure translation agency called Applied Language Solutions, located on the Yorkshire Moors, close to where the Moors Murders were committed. This agency had previously had some involvement in hiring interpreters for courts, but it was one of the smallest in the field. The Ministry of Justice signed a three-year contract with this agency, worth several million pounds, for the supply of an unlimited and unspecified number of interpreters to work in the criminal courts throughout the UK. Prior to its decision, the Ministry of Justice had conducted a so-called “consultation” with court interpreters, which the court interpreters’ union has dubbed a “non-sultation”. Representatives of the Ministry toured the country and were surprised to discover that at every venue, the interpreters were unanimous in their outright rejection of the idea. Their opinions were ignored. Yet even before the ink was dry on the contract, Applied Language Solutions had been taken over by Capita plc, a gigantic company growing by leaps and bounds which describes itself as “UK leader in business process management and outsourcing solutions”. The result was nothing short of a disaster, to such an extent that no fewer than two government committees have since been investigating the deal.

The Ministry of Justice had originally claimed that this outsourcing to a single monopoly was a cost-cutting measure that would save £18 million a year. This figure – plucked from thin air, of course as are all these “cost saving estimates” – was subsequently reduced to £12 million. No revised figures have been provided (surprise!), but one day it will be revealed that this “cost-cutting” exercise will have actually *cost* the taxpayer a great deal of money.

The reasons for this are many. First of all, no surprise to learn that professional court interpreters who were now being offered a **maximum** of £16.00 per hour of actual time spent working in court (no compensation for travelling time, waiting time, etc.) were unenthusiastic about continuing to work for what amounted to below minimum wage. It should be pointed out that to become a professional interpreter, holder of the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting required an investment in an expensive training course and taking the examination set by the Chartered Institute of Linguists which costs £800. Consequently, trained interpreters left the profession *en masse,* some even leaving the UK in order to earn a decent living as a court interpreter in their country of origin. The quality of the present crop of court interpreters can be imagined, it certainly leaves judges and barristers quailing at the prospect of cases involving interpreters. Many interpreters do not bother to show up, so that the court’s time is wasted and defendants languish in custody who would have been released on bail weeks ago if an interpreter had been provided. The follow-up to this move by the Ministry of Justice was to cut the money paid to lawyers through the Legal Aid Scheme to such a low figure that the big law firms and of course law students and young practitioners are fleeing the criminal justice system. If the situation continues, there is no future for the practice of criminal law in the United Kingdom and defendants will be denied their fundamental human right of representation in a court of law.

The takeover by Capita of all the interpreting services for the whole of the United Kingdom is symptomatic. Capita’s tentacles now extend through virtually every service industry in the UK, from share registration to estate agencies to education, healthcare, recruitment and children’s services. The company boasts that 120 local authorities use its services. It is symbolic of this government’s worship at the Church of Privatisation, and preferably Monopoly Privatisation.

Several other companies will spring to mind when the subject is mentioned of companies with far-reaching tentacles and multiple interests. In fact, between four and eight such companies currently dominate business in the United Kingdom, their inefficiencies and even failures swept under the carpet, as they continue to be awarded big government contracts. G4S, “the largest security company in the world” according to its website, was responsible for failing to provide security staff for the Olympic Games and is under investigation for misreporting prisoner tagging statistics to our old friend, the Ministry of Justice. Their management of private prisons, together with their alleged rival Serco, is also under investigation. [Ed Miliband](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/edmiliband) has called for a rethink of the “outsourcing of policing” and said that G4S should be blocked from getting new government contracts in the wake of the Games controversy.

There has never been a government, even a Conservative government, that oversaw such a concentration of big business dominating and crushing the competition, despite European Union competition and anti-trust laws. These companies have proven their inefficiency time and again but they cock a snook at any attempts to curb their power. It is vital that this situation be ended.

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