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# Small Boats, Big Contracts: Extracting Value from the UK's Post-Brexit Asylum 'Crisis'

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## Abstract

This article discusses post-Brexit asylum policy in the UK. On the surface, Brexit had little impact on asylum, but Brexit, combined with the new phenomenon of small boat Channel crossings, created the conditions for a new and extreme UK policy agenda. It explains how politicians have sought to deliver border sovereignty performatively after Brexit by introducing extreme measures, ostensibly—though not practically—to stop small boat Channel crossings, and how private actors have sought to profit from people seeking asylum within this policy regime. These interrelated political and financial interests are pursued irrespective of the fact that none of the policies being advanced will 'stop the boats'.

**Keywords:** asylum, Brexit, Channel crossings, migration, UK

## Introduction

ON THE SURFACE, Brexit had little impact on asylum in the UK. The UK was never part of Schengen, already had border controls in France and Belgium which would not be removed post-Brexit, had opt-out privileges on EU directives relating to asylum, and the only relevant agreement—the Dublin regulation—saw very few people transferred between EU states and the UK, with more sent away than received. But, combined with the rise of small boat Channel crossings, Brexit created the conditions for a new and extreme UK policy agenda on asylum. This agenda has involved criminalising small boat crossings, ending the right to apply for asylum for all spontaneous arrivals (essentially all asylum seekers) and brokering a deal with Rwanda to deport people to the central African state. These policies will not 'solve' the issue of people crossing the Channel and there is clear evidence that the UK government knows this.<sup>1</sup> This new agenda will also have cascading policy

implications and is likely to manufacture a series of crises—of illegality, exploitation, housing, destitution, health, deportation logistics and in the judicial system, to name a few. There seems, then, little benefit to these costly policies.

While the policy seems confounding to many observers, including academics and lawyers, there are those who seek to benefit from Channel crossings. This article explains how various actors have attempted to extract value from people seeking asylum—in some cases more successfully than others. For politicians, there is a perception that advancing policies which are focussed on deterrence through cruelty and punishment allows them to deliver border sovereignty, performatively, after Brexit. This is particularly facilitated by the incorporation of former UKIP interests into the Conservative Party following Brexit and the subsequent shift to the right in many policy areas. For a government struggling to appear competent after fourteen years of austerity cuts, economic crisis, corruption, a mismanaged pandemic and five prime ministers, 'small boats' seemed to offer a political opportunity. However, while it appeals to and appeases far-right factions of the

<sup>1</sup>Home Office, *Sovereign Borders: International Asylum Comparisons Report—Section 1: Drivers and Impact on Asylum Migration Journeys*, Home Office Analysis and Insight, September 2020; [https://freemovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Annex-A-Sovereign-Borders-International-Asylum-](https://freemovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Annex-A-Sovereign-Borders-International-Asylum-Comparisons-Report-Section-1-Drivers-and-impact-on-asylum-migration-journeys.pdf)

[Comparisons-Report-Section-1-Drivers-and-impact-on-asylum-migration-journeys.pdf](https://freemovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Annex-A-Sovereign-Borders-International-Asylum-Comparisons-Report-Section-1-Drivers-and-impact-on-asylum-migration-journeys.pdf)

Conservative Party, it has proved divisive amongst the public, and does not look likely to convert into electoral success. At the same time, for a wide range of private companies, these new asylum policies allow for the extraction of direct financial value from people seeking asylum and from the enforcement of borders. Of course, as the party of big business and capital, facilitating this economic extraction is also aligned with Conservative Party ideology.

## Small boat Channel crossings: how did we get here?

The story of the Channel border zone is one that is very familiar to those who research borders globally. It is a story of efforts to harden borders, the subsequent production of 'illegal' (henceforth 'irregular') migration and the creation of a business opportunity for smuggling. These three elements—bordering, irregular migration and the economy of smuggling—quickly become locked in an intensifying spiral, ultimately producing risky journeys and deaths. States introduce borders to stop movement, usually of negatively racialised populations, but a significant number of people continue to move, for a whole host of reasons. Maybe because they are refugees, or they are determined to reach family; maybe they speak the language of the host state or because of global inequality they have a dream that the other side of the border will be better than where they find themselves now. It is usually a combination of these reasons. But whatever the reason, the movement continues. As part of this dynamic, private actors and security companies have many opportunities to extract profit.

As movement becomes more difficult, smugglers are needed to help people navigate clandestine border crossings. 'Smugglers' covers a chain of horizontally connected contacts including family and friends. Only a small number could be considered members of 'organised criminal gangs' which is partly why it is so difficult to catch and stop them.<sup>2</sup> In response, states tend to introduce even stricter border controls, which make crossing

borders yet more difficult and more deadly. But, as before, people continue to move, even though their already criminalised movement has just been made much more difficult. So, the more organised and profit-seeking smugglers get more business and can charge more money, the routes change and the journeys become more dangerous. In Europe and North America (and in the specific context of entrenched neoliberal governance in the UK), borders, then, are further fortified by private actors funded by governments and the spiral continues.

In the case of the English Channel, this dynamic began with the Commonwealth Immigration Act 1962, which imposed restrictions on people who had previously moved freely to Britain from the Commonwealth and crown colonies. This 'bordering' transformed regular migration into irregular migration and created demand for smuggling. In 1968, the Cross-Channel Intelligence Conference (CCIC) was created to foster collaboration between police in the UK and France (with Belgium later joining).<sup>3</sup> Ahead of the Channel Tunnel opening in 1994, operations were stepped up, with the establishment of the European Liaison Unit in Kent. Officers from the UK and French police would now operate regularly on either side of the border.

In 1995 the Schengen free movement space was created in Europe, but the UK opted out, making the Anglo-French border an external border of Schengen. By 1998, there was an increasing number of homeless refugees living in the Calais area hoping to cross to the UK, particularly those fleeing conflict in the former Yugoslavia. A centre operated by the Red Cross was opened to support them, but by 2001 it was overwhelmed and conditions had become squalid. People attempted to reach the UK by walking through the tunnel, riding on trains or stowing away inside vehicles. On Christmas day 2001, 500 refugees entered the tunnel with the aim of walking to the UK. Eurotunnel subsequently launched legal proceedings for the closure of the Sangatte refugee centre,

<sup>2</sup>M. Gallien and F. Weigand, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling*, London, Routledge, 2022.

<sup>3</sup>J. W. E. Sheptycki, 'Police co-operation in the English Channel region 1968–1996', *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1998, pp. 216–35.

spending £3 million to enhance security around the terminal to reduce irregular crossings.

Around this time there had been a significant increase in asylum applications across Europe. Though most refugees still stayed in the regions they were from, new wars, population displacements and new means of travelling further afield meant that more people were able to flee to Europe. These refugees tended to be viewed as unwelcome and illegitimate across the continent. By 2001, when David Blunkett became UK Home Secretary, the term 'bogus asylum seekers' filled the front pages of the tabloid press daily. In response to this moral panic, the New Labour government embarked on an unprecedented policy programme which, over the next eight years, enhanced border controls and stripped people seeking asylum in the UK of many basic rights and entitlements. To address the problems in Calais, Blunkett and French interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, agreed to a deal ordering the closure of the Sangatte centre and divided up the residents between France and the UK.

Nevertheless, crossings, smuggling and the intensification of borders continued. By 2003, the Treaty of Le Touquet committed the UK and France to intensified reciprocal border controls and the full transfer of the UK's southern border to France. In 2004, a similar deal was made with Belgium. At this point, there had been so much investment in the fortification of the Channel Tunnel entrance that crossing via the tunnel was almost impossible. For people seeking asylum, stowing away in lorries was now the only option, and smugglers began focussing their attention on lorry parks and other haulage locations with low security in northern France. While they waited for their chance to cross, refugees were still living in informal camps in the Calais area. These camps, sometimes housing over 1,000 people, were sporadically destroyed by the authorities, with inhabitants being arrested, relocated or abandoned in different combinations.

By 2014 there was no end in sight to this cycle of bordering, shifting journeys, informal encampments, smuggling, and more bordering. Ever larger sums of money were being transferred to France and to private companies to fortify the border further. A UK/France Joint Ministerial Declaration that year

committed the UK to spending £12 million over three years on border security in northern France. Despite this investment, the increasing surveillance and fortification of the border, combined with escalating refugee displacement following the Syrian civil war, created a bottleneck in Calais. The informal camp known as 'the jungle' was established in April 2015 and, by summer of the following year, it housed up to 10,000 people in desperate and unsanitary conditions. This was not represented as a humanitarian crisis situation in the UK, but as a potential invasion. UK Prime Minister David Cameron infamously described refugees as 'a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs'.<sup>4</sup> Rather than seeking sustainable responses, the UK committed £10 million for border security in northern France.

In 2015–16, the UK contributed £63 million more towards securing the Port of Calais and the Eurotunnel, including extra fencing and infrastructure, security guards, search dogs and detection technology. French authorities deployed more than 1,300 police officers to prevent crossings. This was all happening against the backdrop of an unfolding humanitarian disaster at Europe's borders. Every day British media reported on the escalating refugee crisis; in the Brexit referendum campaign, refugee movements across Europe were depicted as an army of brown men on the march towards Britain. In a campaign that contained racist and xenophobic propaganda, an invasion of refugees was represented as inevitable without 'taking back control', as the Leave campaign promised.

## Post-Brexit asylum policy

The material impacts that Brexit would have on UK asylum appeared at first to be very small. The only thing that would change concretely was participation in the Dublin Regulation, which meant that the UK could send people back to another EU country if they were found to have travelled through that country, and that some families could be reunited within the EU. In practice, the UK

<sup>4</sup>BBC News, 'David Cameron criticised over migrant "swarm" language', 30 July 2015; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33716501>

had received more people under Dublin transfers than it sent away and the numbers were always very small. There is evidence that people have attempted to burn their fingerprints off with acid or fire in order to evade Dublin transfers, but not that it has a deterrent effect.<sup>5</sup> However, what Brexit did was create a political opportunity for the far right within and outside the Conservative Party to reimagine UK immigration and asylum policy. Brexit was fought and won on the immigration issue, creating not only the political space, but a political necessity to reformulate the UK's entire immigration policy. What this meant was the normalisation of a far-right agenda which would almost end the possibility of asylum in the UK. The fact that this coincided with a shift from lorries to small boats galvanised this agenda.

As the UK grappled with the shock of Brexit, construction work continued on the 'great wall of Calais', a four-metre high, 1.5 km long barrier along the main road to the Calais port, paid for by the UK government. Informal camps were demolished, but soon reassembled. By now, it was extremely difficult to stow away in lorries. Fences, dogs, infra-red detectors, secure lorry parks, giant lorry-sized x-ray machines, artificial lakes and all sorts of high-tech equipment—much of it funded by UK government contracts with private security companies—meant that lorry routes were becoming unviable. In many ways, then, things continued as they had since the 1990s. The border was further fortified, yet many people continued to move. However, the emerging dynamics of cross Channel irregular migration following twenty years of bordering in northern France, plus the pandemic, made crossings that were previously hidden suddenly highly visible.

In 2018, people started to experiment with small boat Channel crossings, stealing boats in the local Calais area. That year, around 300 people arrived in the UK this way, with then Home Secretary Savid Javid declaring this a 'major incident'. At the same time, the

UK government committed to spending €50 million to improve security and reduce irregular journeys via French ports in the north.<sup>6</sup> They were fortifying against homeless refugees stuck at the Calais bottleneck who wanted to stow away in lorries. This only furthered a shift to small boats. By 2019, over 1,800 people crossed in small boats, by now a tried and tested route, and the plan was to respond with yet stronger borders. By January 2019, a UK-France 'joint action plan' on illegal migration across the Channel in small boats had been drafted. The UK committed a further £3.6 million for reinforced preventive security measures such as CCTV, night vision goggles and number plate recognition capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

By August that year it was clear that more bordering was not stopping small boat crossings. Nevertheless, the UK and France met again and agreed to 'intensify joint action to tackle small boat crossings in the Channel' and the UK committed an extra €2.5 million. By 2020, having encouraged the crisis, the UK government presented more bordering as the solution. Then Home Secretary Priti Patel appointed royal marine Dan O'Mahoney to a new position of 'clandestine Channel threat commander'. O'Mahoney was tasked with making Channel crossings in small boats 'unviable'. What happened instead was that crossings became more dangerous. On 27 October 2020, seven people died in the Channel when their boat sank and the 'evil smuggling gangs' became a discursive and practical focus of the UK government. If the authorities could 'break the business model of smugglers' then, they claimed, the problem would be solved. The UK and France signed a joint statement on tackling illegal migration which would increase the number of police in Calais. The UK committed €31.4 million to pay for surveillance and detection technology and measures to increase border security. The following year, 28,000 people crossed the English Channel in small boats. Yet, the numbers of UK asylum applications that year were in line with European trends, suggesting that this was a shift in mode of travel rather

<sup>5</sup>G. Glouftsiou and A. Casaglia, 'Epidermal politics: control, violence and dissent at the biometric border', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2023, pp. 567–82.

<sup>6</sup>UK Government, UK-France Summit, 3 March 2016; [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a818acce5274a2e8ab548b3/UKFRS\\_Migration\\_2\\_March.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a818acce5274a2e8ab548b3/UKFRS_Migration_2_March.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>M. Gower, *Irregular Migration: A Timeline of UK–French Cooperation*, House of Commons Library, no. 9681, 22 March 2023; <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9681/CBP-9681.pdf>



than an increase in overall numbers irregularly crossing the border.

Stopping small boat Channel crossings had by this point become central to the Conservative government's revisioning of a 'sovereign' post-Brexit immigration policy. In March 2021, the government published its flagship post-Brexit immigration policy, the 'new plan for immigration', which outlined a scheme to make all 'irregular' arrivals (all small boat arrivals) inadmissible for asylum in the UK, to introduce life sentences for those who facilitate irregular travel, to expand immigration detention and suggested the possibility of deportation to a 'safe third country' (later announced as Rwanda). At the same time, the UK and France announced €62.7 million for more border security measures in northern France and the Channel.

While the border controls aimed ostensibly to stop people from moving, new legislation was based around the idea of the 'deterrent effect', a spectacular punishment for people who crossed, in order to deter others who might consider crossing. It is worth mentioning here that there is no evidence globally that deterrent effects work, with even Australia's policy of collecting people in the sea and placing them indefinitely and without legal process on Manus Island failing to have a deterrent effect.<sup>8</sup> A leaked Home Office briefing pack for the Home Secretary confirmed that the lack of evidence for the deterrent effect was well known.<sup>9</sup> Not letting this lack of evidence get in the way of policy, in April 2022 the UK and Rwandan governments signed a 'memorandum of understanding' committing to relocating asylum seekers to Rwanda, where their claims would be assessed.<sup>10</sup> The Illegal Migration Act 2023 went further, excluding all

Channel crossers from the right to apply for asylum. Despite all this, almost 46,000 people crossed the Channel in small boats that year, with most applying for asylum.

The first flight to Rwanda was halted by a combination of direct action and last-minute legal challenges. The policy hit trouble in the courts almost immediately, with the Rwanda plan being found to be in breach of both national and international law by the Supreme Court in November 2023.<sup>11</sup> Later the same day, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that he would send more money to Rwanda and pass an emergency law to declare Rwanda safe. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act passed in April 2024 and work began to detain and deport people.

Borders produce irregular migration and lead to smuggling, rather than stopping movement, and there is no evidence that the deterrent effect works. If the Illegal Migration Act 2023 is fully implemented, the UK government will produce an expanding population of 'illegal immigrants' with no right to apply for asylum and no recourse to public funds. Where will these people go? Why would they stay in contact with the government? This will have cascading impacts across UK frontline services by manufacturing destitution, poverty and ill health, producing a growing population of people liable to labour exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery.

In light of all that we know about borders and irregular migration, and how they have interacted in this particular border zone, we might ask why the UK government would pursue this doomed-to-fail policy agenda. It seems like a losing strategy by all measures. But, for specific elites, there is value in the Channel crossings policy response.

## The post-Brexit politics of asylum

As academics working on value in the international migration regime have shown, illegalised migrants have 'status value'. That is, their status as illegalised subjects enables

<sup>8</sup>M. Gleeson and N. Yacoub, 'Cruel, costly and ineffective: the failure of offshore processing in Australia', University of New South Wales, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, 2021; [https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/files/Policy\\_Brief\\_11\\_Offshore\\_Processing.pdf](https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/files/Policy_Brief_11_Offshore_Processing.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Home Office, *Sovereign Borders*.

<sup>10</sup>Home Office, *Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and Rwanda*, UK Government, 2022; <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-mou-between-the-uk-and-rwanda>

<sup>11</sup>Supreme Court, 'R (on the application of AAA And others) (Respondents/Cross Appellants) v Secretary of State for the Home Department (Appellant/Cross Respondent)', 2023, UKSC, 42 on appeal from [2023] EWCA Civ 745; <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/uksc-2023-0093.html>

various actors to extract value from them. Politically, the status value of illegalised migrants supports the divide and rule logic of racial capitalism, advancing nationalist ideas of who belongs and who needs to be excluded and punished. Non-citizenship and illegalisation are also interconnected with profit making because they are the necessary conditions for the emergence of carceral economies of migration control, as geographer Lauren Martin has argued.<sup>12</sup> While this has been true for a long time, Brexit increased the status value of illegalised migrants and migration control, bringing them to the fore of political discussion. Combined with the wider political context, the value of 'stopping the boats' increased in salience.

At the same time, between 2010–23, the Conservative Party—initially in coalition and then as the sole governing party—presided over a series of crises and scandals against a backdrop of managed economic decline of historic proportions. It is in this context that, through Channel crossings, the status value of asylum seekers increased and presented an opportunity—an emergency to which they would respond with exceptional measures. The Brexit referendum, initially offered up as an appeasement to a minority within the Conservative Party, divided the country and furthered economic and public infrastructure decline which had begun under austerity. The government presented the situation in the Channel as a crisis; their plan to enhance border controls and send people to Rwanda as the only viable solution.

Initially, this strategy of distraction—drawing on the status value of asylum seekers—worked. Immigration had fallen out of the top ten issues of concern to voters after Brexit, but in 2020 public concern about it started to increase. By 2023, it was back in the top issues of concern to voters, with one in five Britons saying immigration was a key issue facing the country.<sup>13</sup> Amongst

Conservative voters, concern was much higher than in the general electorate.<sup>14</sup> Right-wing factions had come to dominate the Conservative Party after it absorbed UKIP following Brexit, then seeking to see off the resurgent threat from Nigel Farage in his newly formed Reform UK party. This meant that the 'public' that the party was seeking to appeal to were those who supported a far-right agenda on immigration, who may have voted for UKIP in the past and may be considering voting for the new far-right, anti-immigration Reform party in the future.

The strategy, however, backfired. At the same time as promoting asylum seeking and small boat Channel crossings as an issue that the British public should be concerned about, the government also consistently failed in its own aim of stopping the boats. This led to dissatisfaction with the government response and polls showed that some right-wing voters were considering voting for Reform. At the same time, many voters were horrified by the Rwanda policy, with 'control concerns' and 'compassion concerns' equally represented amongst those dissatisfied with immigration policy according to polls.<sup>15</sup> In other words, having sought to benefit politically from being tough in the extreme on small boat Channel crossings, this strategy failed to materialise any such benefit.

The policies advanced in response to Channel crossings can be understood as highly symbolic in that their potential power lies in the idea of tough control and appeals to a fiction of sovereignty, rather than their potential to address genuinely the issue of people moving via dangerous routes. But this has very real material effects, as the symbolic value attached to 'sovereignty' is extracted from the racialised punishment, incarceration and dismantling of rights for those claiming asylum. Framing Channel crossings as a crisis which the government can solve through bordering and relocations cannot succeed on its own terms. Any imagined political value to be extracted is therefore (violently) performative and time

<sup>12</sup>L. Martin, 'Carceral economies of migration control', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2021, pp. 740–57.

<sup>13</sup>L. Richards, M. Fernández-Reino and S. Blinder, *UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern*, Migration Observatory, COMPAS, University of Oxford, 2023; <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>

<sup>14</sup>Martin, 'Carceral economies of migration control'.

<sup>15</sup>H. Rolfe, S. Katwala and S. Ballinger, *Dilemmas of Control: What does the Public Think about Immigration and how should Politicians Respond?*, British Future, 2023; <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Immigration-attitudes-tracker-report-2023-final.pdf>

limited, sowing the seeds of its own failure in terms of appealing to either far-right voters or the general electorate.

Nevertheless, the Conservatives successfully pushed Channel crossings up the political agenda at a time when almost every area of life in Britain needed urgent attention. The topic of small boats will be central to the 2024 general election. With this in mind, perhaps the most potent political value that will be extracted is in the future. As right-wing Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg said on *GB News*: 'I don't think there is a single act of parliament that the UK could pass that will deal with illegal migration until we leave the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and take back control of our borders. As with Brexit, this is about sovereignty'.<sup>16</sup> Post-Brexit asylum policy, in other words, may have laid the groundwork for a 'Brexit 2.0' campaign—seeking an end to human rights by leaving the ECHR. Whilst violently exploiting the status value of criminalised migrants may not lead to direct electoral success, this has not stopped the Conservative Party from attempting to do so (evidenced by the recent 'safety of Rwanda' legislation). This has worked to normalise far-right and authoritarian anti-immigration practices further into the British state and has been enacted by creating misery, fear and deprivation of rights for tens of thousands of people. Any future centre-right Labour government is likely to be shaped by the dynamics of this process of value extraction.

## The business of bordering

In the short term, the electoral strategy of extracting status value from illegalised people may appear misjudged in purely party-political terms. Nevertheless, this has consequences for British politics and governance more widely and, importantly, for the people targeted by such policies. It also has wider financial value for certain corporate elites. By artificially creating and then symbolically (if not actually) 'solving' a border crisis, there is also a significant amount of

money to be made from irregular migration generally and small boat Channel crossings in particular. Indeed, it is much easier to profit financially from Channel crossings than to benefit politically. State resources are being distributed to private companies for border work with minimal scrutiny and accountability. While there are clear links to the Conservative Party in terms of senior roles in key companies and party donations—for example Mitie, the 'facility management company', whose largest shareholders donated over £50,000 to the Conservative Party over a six-year period—there is not a straightforwardly causal relation between these interests and the advancement of the chosen policy approach.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the coalescing of corporate interests which entangle with state policy, alongside the growing strength of the right of the Conservative Party, shape the investment in, and normalisation of, borders. There is wealth accumulation that is gained through the intensification of borders in the Channel, but this also reflects a wider elite interest in maintaining a system of controls that allows for certain groups of people to be removed and excluded from settlement in the UK. The two are mutually reinforcing.

Money is paid to a mixture of foreign states (primarily France and Rwanda) and private sector companies, with the latter taking the larger portion of expenditure. In both categories—transfers to foreign states and contracts with private companies—it is not easy to locate total spending figures. Even the House of Commons Library has been unable to find a clear figure on spending, stating 'commitments are reported in inconsistent ways (for example, in Euros or GBP, or attributed to calendar or financial years). Unsourced figures have sometimes been reported in the media, and published information does not always clearly identify the recipient'.<sup>18</sup> What is clear, though, is that the sums are large.

Successive agreements with the French government totalled over £232 million in 2014–23, £193 million of which has been spent since 2018. Additional payments of just under £87 million have also been reported. In March 2023, a multi-year commitment was made

<sup>16</sup>J. Rees-Mogg, 'We can only control illegal migration by leaving the ECHR says Jacob Rees-Mogg', *GB News*, 12 December 2023; <https://www.gbnews.com/opinion/illegal-immigration-echr-jacob-rees-mogg>

<sup>17</sup>Corporate Watch, *Mitie Detention Profiteers: 2023 Company Profile*, Corporate Watch, 12 January 2023; <https://corporatewatch.org/mitie-company-profile-2023/>

<sup>18</sup>Gower, *Irregular Migration*.



with the UK contributing £476 million over three years. Meanwhile, £140 million was initially paid to Rwanda to incentivise the government to agree to the relocation agreement, in which only 200 transfers were initially proposed. An extra £100 million was then committed in 2023, with £50 million expected in 2024. A Home Office impact assessment of the Rwanda plan revealed that almost every aspect is difficult to cost and therefore based on shaky calculations.<sup>19</sup> A total estimated cost per person based on various unstable assumptions, with many uncoded dimensions, is at least £169,000 per person deported.

Bearing in mind the lack of evidence for the deterrent effect and the fact that Rwanda can only accept a small number of people, it is odd that no calculation has been made for the costs incurred in housing or supporting people who cannot be deported within forty days. These costs could not be specified owing to the novelty of the new policy regime, Home Office staff note. But what is clear is that owing to the tendency to outsource, the Home Office has a preference for the private sector to carry out much of the immigration and asylum system, meaning increasing financial rewards for private actors if Channel crossings, managed through punitive bordering practices, continue.<sup>20</sup> The Channel crisis has been slowly manufactured by border security infrastructure devised by politicians and delivered via private sector contracts to build fences, barriers and biometric databanks, to fly drones, deploy dogs and detain people.

To gain some sense of the funds being transferred to private companies to support

bordering in northern France and the Channel, the Channel Crossings project has looked at the publicly available Home Office procurement contracts.<sup>21</sup> Analysis presented below is in no way exhaustive, as many of the figures are redacted, or the details of the contracts so vague that it is difficult to be certain that they pertain to dealing with small boat Channel crossings. Nevertheless, over £3.5 billion worth of contracts since 2017 can be identified in this analysis which are tied to Channel crossings. Table 1 below gives ten example contracts active or starting in 2023. BAE Systems was paid £38 million in 2023 for data surveillance and risk analysis and another £10 million for ‘app-related activities’ for border control. Mitie has a contract worth over £514 million for the years 2018–28 for escorting and short-term holding facilities. Mitie has received lucrative contracts for delivering immigration detention in the UK asylum system for some time, demonstrating how investment in the exclusionary politics of asylum creates financial value. Mitie’s largest shareholder is the equity fund Silchester International Investors LLP, the owners of which were noted above as substantial Conservative Party donors. The British government’s involvement with arms manufacturers such as BAE Systems is well documented, with lobbying and donations fuelling the agendas of both major UK political parties.<sup>22</sup>

The lack of transparency that governs corporate influence over the British government is reflected in the information available regarding lucrative border security contracts in the Channel. The Home Office contract with drone company Tekever Ltd, for example, has all figures redacted. Meanwhile, a Tekever promotional video mentions a £1 billion contract over four years from 2019–23 with the UK government, which was then renewed, suggesting spending of at least £2

<sup>19</sup>Home Office, *Impact assessment: illegal migration bill*, UK Government, 2023; [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1165397/Illegal\\_Migration\\_Bill\\_IA\\_-\\_LM\\_Signed-final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1165397/Illegal_Migration_Bill_IA_-_LM_Signed-final.pdf)

<sup>20</sup>M. Bhatia and V. Canning, ‘Misery as business: how immigration detention became a cash cow in Britain’s borders’, in K. Albertson, M. Corcoran and J. Phillips, eds., *Marketisation and Privatisation in Criminal Justice*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2020; M. Bosworth and L. Zedner, *Privatising Border Control: Law at the Limits of the Sovereign State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022; J. Darling, *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum*, London, Pluto Press, 2022.

<sup>21</sup>Channel Crossings Project; <https://channelcrossings.org/>; Contract Finder Pro; <https://www.contractfinderpro.com/awardresults.aspx>

<sup>22</sup>Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, *Written Evidence from The Campaign Against Arms Trade (ACB 1)*, House of Commons, UK Parliament; <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/71130/pdf/>

**Table 1: a snapshot of ten border security contracts (active or starting in 2023)**

Company	Service contracted	Amount	Dates
TEKEVER Ltd.	Maritime patrol aircrafts: UAV managed service to enhance maritime awareness.	£2 billion	2017–26
Mitie Care and Custody Ltd.	Provision of in-country and overseas escorting operation and management of short-term holding facilities and holding rooms and related services.	£514.2 million	2018–28
Serco	Freight searching and escorting of persons at the juxtaposed controls in northern France.	£63 million	2022–27
Fujitsu Services Ltd.	To provide the biometric matcher platform and associated services.	£55 million	2018–23
IBM United Kingdom Ltd.	To provide the biometric matcher platform and associated services.	£54,716,457	2023
BAE Systems Digital Intelligence	Data surveillance and risk analysis	£38 million	2023–26
Identity E2E Ltd.	To support delivery in the migration and borders technology portfolio.	£30 million	2023–26
Entrust Corporation	Personal device based, generic identity verification (GIDV), document verification and facial biometric enrolment, identity capture.	£18.3 million	2023–25
BAE Systems	To deliver the Helios service into border crossing.	£9.95 million	2023
Speedy Asset Services Ltd.	The hire of marquees and supporting items for the Home Office in the South of England. To facilitate the asylum screening process.	£7.7 million	2023–26

billion overall.<sup>23</sup> This is a contract for the delivery of maritime patrol aircrafts, including a ‘UAV managed service’ to enhance maritime awareness. Many asylum seekers have been arrested and imprisoned for smuggling, using drone footage of them on a small boat touching the steering device. This is at least one of the purposes of these drones.

For these companies, Channel crossings are not only a problem to be solved, but a business opportunity to be exploited. Behind the shelter of secrecy and redaction, an unhealthy alliance has formed between the government and some commercial interests. As we know from previous historical examples of the military-industrial and prison-industrial complexes in different contexts, the circulations of funds from states to private security and military

corporations creates economic systems of dependency which solidify and intensify the need for more systems of security and punishment.<sup>24</sup> The private security/state relationship creates a path dependency and wider set of class interests which are invested materially in maintaining the illusion of border security—although this is not unique to the UK—even while bordering creates the conditions for smuggling and dangerous irregular migration, creating future business for private interests.<sup>25</sup> The amount of money being transferred to private companies is vast and growing, and goes largely unquestioned as a ‘public good’. It also far exceeds the much more publicised transfers of money to foreign governments such as France and Rwanda. What is clear is that there are certainly beneficiaries from the ‘crisis’ of small boat Channel crossings. While this is not driving the policy agenda, it is part of a broader set of

<sup>23</sup>A. Fitri, ‘The UK has spent up to £1bn on drones to prevent migrant crossings’, *Tech Monitoring*, 4 April 2022; <https://techmonitor.ai/government-computing/uk-spent-1bn-drones-prevent-migrant-crossings>; ‘TEKEVER signs new 3-year contract with UK Home Office’, *DSEI*, n.d.; <https://www.dsei.co.uk/exhibitor-videos/tekever-signs-new-3-year-contract-uk-home-office>

<sup>24</sup>R. W. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2007.

<sup>25</sup>R. Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2014.

overlapping interests, alongside the Conservative Party's shift to the far right, in support of the current response.

## Conclusion

Brexit created political space for an extreme asylum policy agenda, that is, an approach which seeks to break with human rights enshrined in national and international law, in order to wind down the UK asylum system and to deport people who are seeking asylum in Britain to Rwanda. Our knowledge of how forced migration and borders interact globally tells us that this strategy will not 'stop the boats'. What it seems most likely to achieve is the production of more rightless people in the UK and no plan in terms of how to help, support or keep track of them.

This policy seems doomed to fail on its own terms and to sow the seeds of new crises in the future. But, at the same time the approach aligns with anti-immigration political interests, offering a useful tactic of distraction in the context of broad ranging government failures, and it is highly lucrative for corporate interests. Different actors, then, have tried—and sometimes succeeded—to extract value from irregular migrants seeking asylum in the UK. British politicians have a long history of racialised value extraction, but this

recent conjecture—in the fallout from austerity, Brexit and Covid—when the ruling party has been deeply unpopular and twenty points behind the opposition in opinion polls, is particularly ripe for such efforts. While these efforts are loudly proclaimed, with 'evil smuggling gangs' castigated for profiting from misery, the quiet business of extracting great financial value from people seeking asylum gathers pace. Large contracts are being agreed as the government tells the British public that there is no money for basic public services. These are the disaster capitalists of the crisis of forced migration, reception and human rights in Europe. If politicians are to break the business model of smuggling successfully, they will simultaneously break the legal flipside of this illegal trade: the business model of bordering.

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