

## OUTSOURCING

## Mitie not gated

**F**ACILITIES outsourcer Mitie is fast becoming a favourite provider on government contracts – even as it picks up a string of critical judgments for both its private and public sector work.

Last month, an employment tribunal found that Mitie had wrongly sacked Javier Sánchez Ortiz for leading a union drive among his fellow cleaners working for Mitie on a contract at the *Daily Mail* offices. Ortiz had worked for Mitie for more than eight years, but when he started recruiting cleaners to United Voices of the World (UVW), a small union for the low-paid, they started disciplining him – including accusing Ortiz of faking a fall which kept him off work for a fortnight. Ortiz was sacked in 2018 but had to wait until 2022 for justice, when the employment tribunal found he had been unfairly sacked for trade union activity and awarded him £38,000 in compensation.

Meanwhile, in December the chief inspector of prisons declared that the Mitie-run Kent Intake Unit (KIU), which processes asylum seekers crossing the Channel, was “not fit for purpose”, being a place where “exhausted detainees slept on the floor on thin mats in between rows of fixed seating”, with “unrelated men, women, families and unaccompanied children” sleeping in the same rooms. Mitie said it didn’t control KIU’s physical environment, which was a Home Office issue – but it does seem to have put up with the grim conditions without complaint.

Mitie is responsible for its staff, though, including what inspectors called a “disturbing” event when untrained Mitie staff responded with “excessive” force to a self-harming 14-year-old. One Mitie officer “kicked the boy with some force, before dragging him to the ground with one arm around his neck. Throughout the incident there were too few staff to restrain him safely, and there was repeated use of unauthorised and potentially dangerous techniques.”

Also in December, Mitie was named and shamed by the business department on a list of firms that had failed to pay the minimum wage. Mitie had wrongly deprived 91 workers of £17,893.98, but told *Private Eye* this was a payroll miscalculation and that “HMRC accept this was a technical breach, so we are disappointed to have been included on this list”.

Asked about the poor judgments, Mitie told *Private Eye*: “We have a world-class net promoter score, demonstrating how highly our customers rate and recommend us, are an award-winning employer, and a leader in ESG [environment, social and governance]. As a British business, we are proud to support both our public and private sector customers.”

Mitie is certainly getting more public sector work. Last September it won a two-year £16m contract to run the new women-only Derwentside Immigration Removal Centre in Durham, and in December the Home Office announced a 10-year £92m contract with Mitie to run Scotland’s Dungavel Immigration Removal Centre. It can’t hurt that Mitie has Conservative peer Baroness Coultie on its board.

The Home Office told the *Eye*: “Delivering value for money for the taxpayer whilst treating people with dignity and respect is central to the delivery of all our contracts, including at Dungavel and Derwentside.”



## CHRIST CHURCH OXFORD

## Loudly row the dons...

**C**HRISt CHURCH Oxford is a unique institution, being both a college and a cathedral. In theory the college is run by a governing body (GB) and the cathedral by a chapter, with the dean as convener of both. In practice a small group of academics known as “censors” run it in a style that a former GB member describes as “straight out of a mafia movie”.

Seldom has the word “don” seemed more appropriate: another trustee described an atmosphere of “excessive secrecy” and “silent bullying and intimidation” among governors, with “highly choreographed meetings” at which “academic careers are made or broken by nods and winks passed between senior members”.

The peccadillos of favoured dons are tolerated. There is the Thirsty Don, responsible for the disappearance of £1,000 worth of fine wine from the college’s wine cellar. There is The Fence, accused of trading ancient documents that disappeared from a collection at the university. There is The Belgian, a theology professor who was jailed in 2020 for possessing 28,000 child abuse images and videos. The House, as it is called, looks after its own. When The Belgian found himself in trouble, someone arranged for the hard drive to be removed from his college computer and posted to his home in France.

Then there is the dean: an eight-stone teetotaler with a degree from (shock, horror) Bristol University. Things went wrong almost as soon as the Very Revd Martyn Percy (pictured) arrived at Christ Church in 2014. Some veterans of the governing body were unhappy that he planned to modernise aspects of the college, especially pay scales and safeguarding policies. He had the temerity to ask for job descriptions of senior academics. In 2017, a senior don intimated to colleagues that the dean would have to go, and a year later the governors suspended Percy on 27 charges of “immoral, scandalous and disgraceful” conduct (*Eye* 1484) – a bizarre description of his proposal to reform the college’s internal management, but the only form of words that could justify removing him under statute.

During an 11-day hearing, retired high court judge Sir Andrew Smith uncovered emails in which senior dons called Percy “a manipulative little turd”. One asked: “Do we know any good poisoners?” Another boasted that this would not be the first boss they had “got rid of”. Yet another looked forward to the day when “his wrinkly withered little body is found at Osney Lock”. Sir Andrew Smith rejected the charges, saying he was mystified that they’d ever been brought, but in the process Percy ran up defence costs of £400,000, which the dons then refused to reimburse.

In recent months, however, the House has come under intense pressure from the Charity Commission to resolve the dispute – and the 60-odd members of the GB woke up to the risk that, as trustees, they could be made jointly liable for the multi-million-pound bill the charity ran up while pursuing this vendetta. After a recent visit from Lord Patten, the chancellor of Oxford University, the Percy-cutters finally blinked. A Friday afternoon statement on their website two weeks ago said they had reached a mediated settlement under which Percy will leave the deanery in April.

None of the original conflict is mentioned in the college’s statement. Instead it focuses on a single claim that the dean briefly touched

someone’s hair – she is referred to simply as “X” – in the vestry after morning prayer in October 2020. The dean denied this, but the chaplain went on record saying it might be “the final blow” that others had been looking for.

The college employed a PR firm, and selected hacks were briefed. Members of the cathedral congregation were taken for quiet walks around the cloisters: it was suggested to them the dean’s behaviour was not unlike that of Bishop Peter Ball, the bishop who was jailed in 2015 after a career of sexual assault on 18 young men. One member of the governing body phoned journalists to report that the dean had been seen masturbating under his cassock – something any wearer of clerical garb would realise was almost impossible.

Thames Valley Police investigated, as did a barrister employed by the Church of England. By May 2021 both had concluded that whatever might or might not have happened in the vestry, it did not merit further action. Nevertheless, a second full-dress tribunal was empanelled by the college. It will not be required now.

Ousting the dean is estimated to have cost the governing body around £20m. This includes at least £6m in legal and PR fees, around £12m of cancelled donations and legacies, and an estimated £2m to cover the dean’s legal bills, his compensation settlement and the expenses of the mediation.

Christ Church’s statement two weeks ago was accompanied by one from X saying she had withdrawn her claim. The college declined to publish the dean’s own statement. Anyone reading the official announcement that she had settled her claim “against the Dean” might get the impression that the House had spent millions of pounds of charitable money defending her honour and that the dean had finally confessed, resigned and reached a financial settlement with her. The truth is rather different: it is Christ Church that has chosen to pay her off, so it can justify cancelling the tribunal. Percy continues to deny the allegation and has not made any settlement with her.

If the college’s mealy-mouthed statement was intended to bring this acrimonious epic to an end, it failed. In the days that followed, the House was deluged with angry letters and emails complaining at the shoddy treatment of the dean. “Incredibly,” a university officer says, “they have managed to light another fire in Tom Quad.”

The dons of Christ Church seem determined to keep on Percy-cutting to the very end. Last week the sub-dean indicated to members of the congregation that even though Percy is no longer suspended by church or college, and has been convicted of no wrongdoing, he will still not be allowed into the cathedral. Consequently there will be no farewell service.

And what of the Bishop of Oxford, Steven Croft, a shadowy figure in this saga whose personal animus against Percy goes back decades? Even when the church’s highest court dismissed all charges against the dean months ago, he refused to accept its verdict. He shares the same lawyers as the vindictive dons, and his loyalty to the cause of removing the dean has been unwavering. The bishop marked this month’s settlement with a statement of his own calling for reconciliation and healing; the very next day, he issued an edict seeking to prevent Percy from presiding at a friend’s wedding in April.

