# Twitter Thread by Jo Maugham

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## So, just before Christmas, Government what it called a "response" to this New York Times account of cronyism in pandemic spending.

And I said, when that "response" - which you can read here https://t.co/gLEJzuqoAx - was published that every single notional rebuttal by Government of a claim made by the New York Times was false, misleading or both.

And it's time for me to make good.

Here's the first "rebuttal" by Government to the New York Times' claim that: "The government handed out thousands of contracts to fight the virus, some of them in a secretive V.I.P. lane."

**Claim: "The government handed out thousands of contracts to fight the virus, some of them in a secretive "V.I.P. lane."**

Response: At the peak of the pandemic, UK Government officials were inundated with approaches from companies and other commercial actors with offers to procure or provide PPE and other relevant equipment. To help establish a mechanism for handling the approaches, as well as increase the speed at which they could be dealt with, an inbox was created for referrals. This inbox was available across government and to parliamentarians from all parties. In total, the UK government received over 15,000 offers of support from businesses to help with PPE, and MPs were inundated with offers of help from their constituents. MPs rightly were keen to pass on offers.

The government remains hugely grateful for the outpouring of offers of help and the high priority mailbox allowed procurement officials to assess more quickly offers from more credible sources, such as large companies with established contacts and those more capable of supplying at speed.

The government also ensured that offers of support raised by Opposition MPs were dealt with expeditiously. As the National Audit Office report notes, all PPE offers, no matter from where they came, went through the same eight step official assurance process, including quality checks, price controls and other due diligence. This eight step process has been published in the NAO's report.

A number of points might be made.

(1) Government cannot say the NYT got it wrong. (2) the NAO found the VIP lane (later renamed the high-priority lane) "sat alongside" the normal lane. And I have shown elsewhere VIP contracts were handled by different teams all the way through.

## Figure 6

High-priority lane for the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE)

**The cross-government PPE team established a high-priority lane to assess and process PPE leads given to them by government officials, ministers' offices, MPs and members of the House of Lords, senior NHS staff and other health professionals**

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|---|---|
| Background | Established by the cross-government PPE team as a dedicated lane used to assess and process high-priority leads for PPE, that it considered more credible or where it considered more urgency was needed. This lane sat alongside a normal lane to process over 15,000 offers of support to supply PPE. |

(3) Although Govt says "offers of support raised by Opposition MPs were dealt with expeditiously" the NAO report does not record any referrals made by an Opposition MP leading to a contract - and the Government response telling does not say any did.

(4) There is also a basic tension in Government's position. How can VIP offers both (i) "go through the same eight step official assurance process" as normal offers whilst (ii) allowing "procurement officials to assess more quickly offers from more credible sources"?

Here's the second "rebuttal" by Govt to the NYT claim that of contracts "worth nearly $22 billion.... about $11 billion went to companies either run by friends and associates of politicians in the Conservative Party, or with no prior experience or a history of controversy".

**Claim: The New York Times "analyzed a large segment of it (government spending), the roughly 1200 central government contracts that have been made public, together worth nearly $22 billion. Of that, about $11 billion went to companies either run by friends and associates of politicians in the Conservative Party, or with no prior experience or a history of controversy".**

Response: The New York Time's definition of 'politically connected' is misleading. As the article sets out, they defined this as 'companies with political connections were defined as those with current or former government officials and advisers on staff, as party donors or who have received a British honors system award, such as a knighthood or peerage'.

This definition fundamentally misunderstands the British state. government officials - or civil servants - are politically neutral and therefore it is simply wrong to infer that they have political connections. The New York Times also considers those who received a state honour as having a political connection. Again it is either a misrepresentation or a misunderstanding of the honours system to assert that someone receiving an honour automatically has a 'political connection'. In fact, the honours system operates independently of government, with the vast majority of honours recommended by independent honours committees.

Finally, this implies that any company with a 'connection' to the government got a contract as a result of that connection. The National Audit Office examined a series of contracts and "found that the ministers had properly declared their interests, and … found no evidence of their involvement in procurement decisions or contract management". This was not reflected by the New York Times.

Again, the first point to note is that the Government does not and cannot say that the NYT got it wrong. What it does do is make a series of misleading and false claims.

(1) Although civil servants should be politically neutral former civil servants don't need to be. And "Government officials and advisers" - the term used by the NYT - includes political advisers who have no obligation of neutrality (and who we know did lobby for winning bidders).

(2) To say that "In fact, the honours system operates independently of government" is just false. The day before Government published its rebuttal Johnson overruled the independent House of Lords appointments commission by handing a peerage to Peter Cruddas.

And (3) it is just false to suggest - as Govt does - that the NAO gave Ministers the all clear. 493 suppliers went through the VIP lane, for only 232 was the source of that referral recorded, of those recorded 144 were Ministers, and the NAO pointedly declined to rule out fraud.

**25** While government had the necessary legal framework in place to award contracts directly, it had to balance the need to procure large volumes of goods and services quickly, with the increased commercial and propriety risks associated with emergency procurement. We looked in detail at a sample of contracts selected on a risk basis. Although we found sufficient documentation for a number of procurements in our sample, we also found specific examples where there is insufficient documentation on key decisions, or how risks such as perceived or actual conflicts of interest have been identified or managed. In addition, a number of contracts were awarded retrospectively, or have not been published in a timely manner. This has diminished public transparency, and the lack of adequate documentation means we cannot give assurance that government has adequately mitigated the increased risks arising from emergency procurement or applied appropriate commercial practices in all cases. While we recognise that these were exceptional circumstances, there are standards that the public sector will always need to apply if it is to maintain public trust.

Finally (4), what of the specific NAO statement relied on by Government? The first pic is what Government says and the second is what the NAO found. You can see that the NAO statement is qualified by "In the cases we examined" (which the response fails to mention)...

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... and because fewer than half of VIP cases recorded who the referrer was - this majority being the most troubling class of case - the NAO was simply unable to identify whether there were potential conflicts of interest and so safely assess the character of Ministers' conduct.