

Baroness Mone PPE scandal deepens crisis of UK Conservative government

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The scandal involving Conservative Party Baroness Michelle Mone is throwing oil on the fire of the deepening crisis of the Sunak government.

Mone admitted in a December 17 interview with the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg that she stands to benefit from tens of millions of pounds of profit from personal protective equipment (PPE) sold to the UK government during the pandemic by a company led by her husband, Doug Barrowman.

Tens of billions of pounds in get-rich-quick COVID contracts were handed out from Westminster from the first days of the pandemic, with almost £20 billion awarded without any form of tendering. Government cronies in big business made a killing. Mone's support helped PPE Medpro secure a place in a "VIP lane" used during the COVID pandemic to prioritise companies. PPE Medpro secured contracts worth more than £200 million.

Vast amounts of the PPE supplied by the private sector profiteers during the height of the pandemic was not fit for purpose. The government is suing PPE Medpro for a breach of contract, after rejecting the surgical gowns for which it paid £122 million. PPE Medpro maintained the gowns had been fit for purpose.

A separate civil case was launched by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the House of Lords commissioner for standards launched another investigation into whether Mone had breached the Lords' code of conduct.

Mone, who fronted a lingerie company, shot to prominence in the Tory Party when she was appointed "Tsar" for business start-ups in David Cameron's government and then elevated to the House of Lords in 2015.

It is established that the highly politically connected Mone contacted, on May 8, 2020, then Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove and fellow Tory peer Theodore Agnew, offering to supply PPE. Agnew referred PPE

Medpro to the "VIP lane".

In June 2020, PPE Medpro was awarded two PPE deals by the Department of Health—one for £122 million for 25 million sterile surgical gowns and one for £89 million for the supply of 210 million face masks. A HSBC bank paper trail establishes that in September 2020 Barrowman received at least £65 million in profits from the PPE deal. These profits were transferred to The Warren Trust, registered in the Isle of Man, with Barrowman the beneficial owner.

In December last year Mone took a leave of absence from the House of Lords in order to "clear her name". This followed a series of exposures the previous month—led by the *Guardian*—indicating that Barrowman had transferred £29 million to an offshore trust, the Keristal Trust, of which Mone and her three adult children were the beneficiaries.

Mone had always insisted that she did not stand to benefit from the PPE deal and denied any role in it being awarded. Mone and her husband had clearly decided by the time of the BBC interview that it was no longer possible to maintain this fiction.

Barrowman said the deal created £60 million profit which was now in a family trust. Half of this is the Keristal trust, from which Mone and her children stand to benefit unless she and Mr Barrowman divorce. Mone will be able to access the millions if her husband dies first.

Kuenssberg asked Mone, "Your family as a unit will benefit from that cash. Why didn't you just be more straightforward about it?" Mone responded, "I'm saying to you that I didn't receive that cash. That cash is not my cash, that cash is my husband's cash, we are married."

She then told Kuenssberg, "If one day, if God forbid, my husband passes away before me, then I am a beneficiary, as well as his children and my children, so yes, of course."

It is ludicrous to claim that Mone would not benefit

from any such profits for years to come. Barrowman is a billionaire and Mone is a multi-millionaire herself. Until this year the couple lived in a luxury £19 million London townhouse. Barrowman has also put his 127ft yacht Lady M—named after Mone—on the market.

Mone admitted, “I did make an error in saying to the press that I wasn’t involved. Hindsight is a wonderful thing. I wasn’t trying to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes, and I regret and I’m sorry for not saying straight out, yes, I am involved.” She added that lying to the media was “not a crime”.

As justification Mone explained, “I was just acting the same way as every other baroness and lord who were also putting names forward.”

Barrowman and Mone are implicitly threatening to spill the beans on wider governmental corruption that resulted in an estimated £4 billion in taxpayers’ money being spent on unusable PPE.

Over a month prior to the BBC interview the *Guardian* reported that representative of Barrowman had said, “The UK government was fully aware of Baroness Mone’s involvement; like many other peers and MPs on the high priority lane, she acted as an intermediary/liaison between PPE Medpro and the Cabinet Office/Department of Health and Social Care.”

Following this Mone was interviewed by the pro-Tory *Telegraph* in a piece headlined, “Baroness Mone: The PPE scandal made me ashamed to be a Tory – I am purely a scapegoat.” The underline read, “Entrepreneur launches fightback over PPE equipment investigations with startling counter-allegations”.

This was the occasion for the launch of a YouTube programme, “The Interview: Baroness Mone and the PPE Scandal”. The programme was paid for by PPE Medpro and fronted by investigative reporter Mark Williams-Thomas.

The *Telegraph* revealed that Barrowman and Mone have a recording from after 2021—when they were in mediation with Department of Health and Social Care—in which a government official is alleged to have told them, “Obviously we understand you’ve made an offer and it’s a sizeable sum of money. We’re just trying to piece together... and thinking through... and I think our view at the moment, and where we stand, is it is probably not likely to be enough to call the dogs off.”

Barrowman gave more details in his interview with Kuenssberg saying, “We get to November 2022, and I attend this negotiation, as opposed to a mediation.

“It’s very, very clear that, you know, they’re interested

in settling but they want a sum of money that, quite honestly, we are not of a mind to pay.

“So, I then have a separate meeting, and this individual asked me would I pay more for the other matter to go away.” Barrowman added, “I was absolutely gobsmacked—I think it raises very serious questions as to what that official meant, what he was saying.”

Asked by Kuenssberg why he did not go to the police with the allegation, Barrowman stated, “I take the advice of my legal team, and the legal team at that point in time suggested that we park that one for now.”

The government responded by seeking to wash their hands of the growing stench. Interviewed by Sky News’ Kay Burley on whether someone who had admitted to lying should be allowed back into parliament, energy minister and Tory peer Martin Callanan said, “It is a matter for her to decide... [but] I would hope she would not be coming back to the House of Lords.”

Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden defended the government’s handling of PPE procurement, insisting there were “no favours or special treatment”, while stating that Mone was not being made a scapegoat.

Labour’s Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting said that no-one watching the BBC’s interview with Mone would be “shedding any tears”, adding, “There’s a fundamental point of principle here, which is, in the midst of a deadly pandemic, when so many people rushed to help others in all sorts of ways... and then there were others who saw the pandemic as an opportunity to make a quick buck at someone else’s expense... Our message to those people who sought to use the pandemic to get rich quick [is]: we want our money back.”

This is nauseating. While the crisis reveals the staggering level of profiteering that took place as the ruling class exploited a pandemic for financial gain, utilising government PPE policies that contributed to hundreds of thousands of deaths, the filthy operation could only take place because Labour, first under Jeremy Corbyn and then Sir Keir Starmer declared that the “task as the Opposition” was to “support the government’s public health efforts while being constructively critical.”



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