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What I Learnt About the Great Procurement Scandal: Building 'My Little Crony'

Sophie Hill explains how she found the Conservative Party, Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings at the centre of her vast interactive map of Government contracts

Sophie Hill 13 November 2020



Boris Johnson speaking at the headquarters of JCB in Rocester, Staffordshire. Photo: Peter Byrne/PA Archive/PA Images

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What I Learnt About the Great Procurement Scandal: Building *'My Little Crony'*

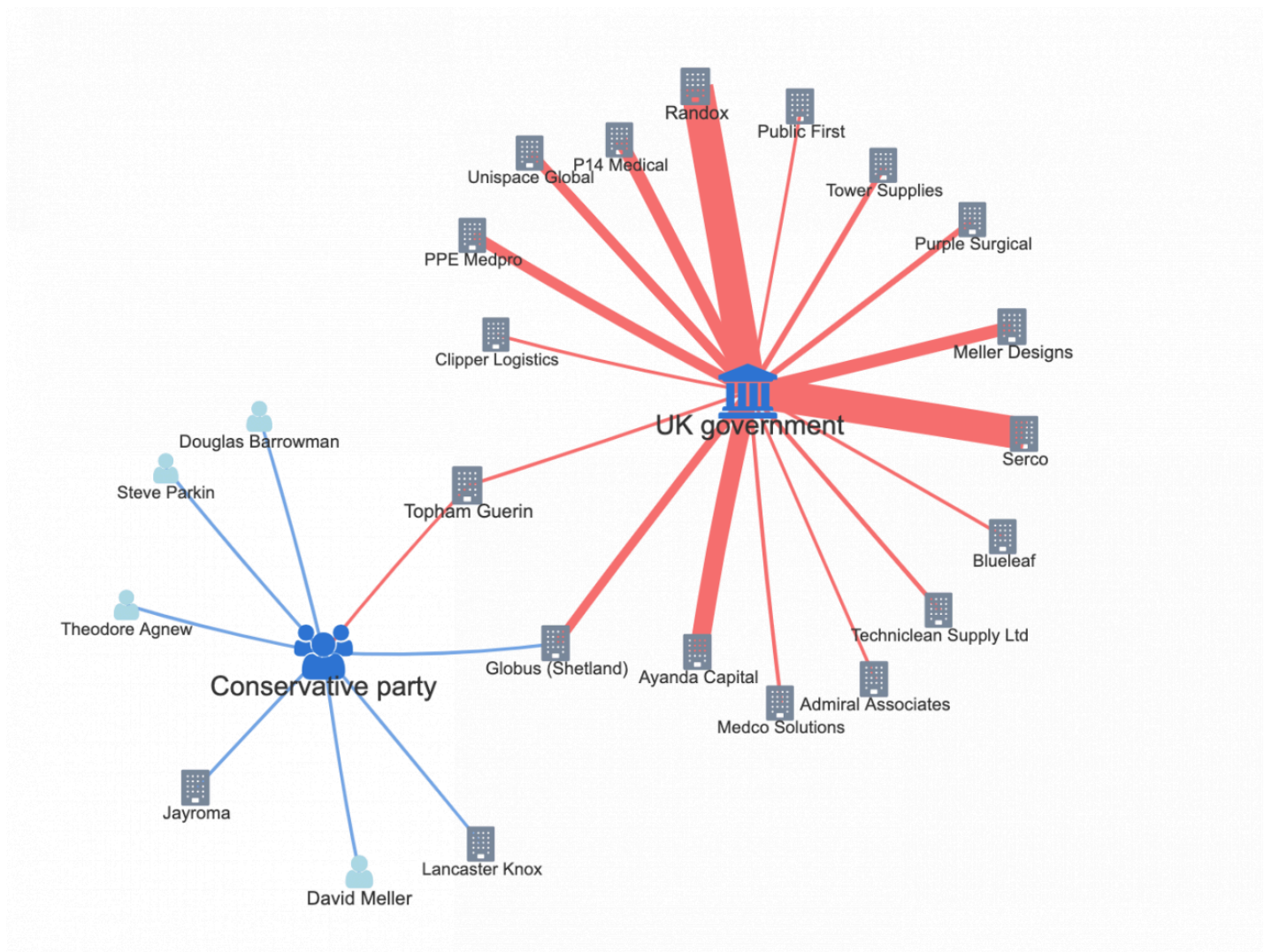
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Reading all the stories about Government contracts awarded during the [Coronavirus](#) pandemic is a bit like starting one of those big Russian novels: all the names sound vaguely familiar, but you struggle to keep track of who's who.

So, I decided to do something that sadly wasn't possible for Leo Tolstoy: I created an interactive map to track the links between the companies and the Government itself. Hence, "[My Little Crony](#)" was born.

The first step involved following the money. The red lines on the map represent contracts awarded by the [UK Government](#) during the pandemic, typically [without competitive tender](#), and the blue lines represent donations made by individuals or companies to the [Conservative Party](#).



Even from this bare-bones network, an overlap is immediately obvious. For example, Globus (Shetland) – a manufacturing company – [has donated](#) more than £350,000 to the Conservatives since 2016 and recently won a £93 million Government contract to supply personal protective equipment (PPE).

Globus does appear to specialise in the manufacture of PPE. On its website, the firm states that it has 25 years of experience in supplying “industry and healthcare”, which includes manufacturing respirators. However, the firm has both donated to the Conservative Party and has received big public contracts in recent months. That is simply a fact.

Informal Arrangements

That said, direct financial connections don't reveal the whole picture. After all, "cronyism" is essentially a social phenomenon, in which trusted friends and associates benefit from their closeness to each other. The Government has openly admitted to using these arrangements during the pandemic. Last week, junior health minister Lord James Bethell [said](#) the Government used "informal arrangements" and personal "contacts" to find PPE suppliers.

Attempting to depict this, I drew on investigative [journalism](#) from a wide range of outlets, including *Byline Times*, to fill in the details – from family ties, to employment histories, to roles at non-profits and think-tanks.

With this more detailed network, it is possible to use simple quantitative tools to understand the central figures – for example, by inspecting each "node" in the network and counting how many connections come out of it.

Unsurprisingly, the UK Government and the Conservative Party emerge as the two central nodes, both having more than 25 connections. Looking at individuals, we find that Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) and his chief aide Dominic Cummings are the most well-connected, with 10 and nine links to others in the network, respectively.

Of course, these numbers must be taken with a pinch of salt, since this network is incomplete. There are likely many connections that haven't yet been uncovered, and there's also a subjective judgement involved in deciding which connections are useful and relevant to include without adding too much visual clutter.

Still, if we look forward down the list of central nodes, some less familiar names pop out. These include Rachel Wolf and James Frayne, a married couple whose [PR](#) firm Public First was [awarded](#) £550,000 from an £840,000 purchase order by

the Cabinet Office early in the pandemic for public research. Between them, Wolf and Frayne have a wide range of ties to the Conservative establishment, having worked for prominent figures like Cabinet Office Minister Michael Gove and former Prime Minister David Cameron, as well as being connected to Dominic Cummings through a variety of campaigns groups, a think tank, and a non-profit organisation.

Since conducting this work, Frayne has [announced](#) his company will not be seeking any more Cabinet Office contracts in the near future.

The Cabinet Office [denies](#) awarding the contract to Public First due to its owners' relationship with Conservative Party figures, saying that “the Government works with a number of suppliers to provide polling and focus group work and has done for decades”.

Knowledge and Change

Another interesting pattern that emerges from my visualisation is how money from Government outsourcing ends up flowing into [tax](#) havens.

Ayanda Capital, a company registered in Mauritius, was awarded a £252 million contract to supply face masks. A substantial portion of those masks – [worth an estimated £150 million](#) – were not up to [NHS](#) standards and could not be used.

Tim Horlick, chief executive of Ayanda Capital, insists the masks were “not unusable or unsafe” and met all Government standards. He [added](#) that the Government had “not wasted any money” in buying them.

Meanwhile, Purple Surgical – a British company – was awarded a £45 million contract to provide respirators, which it tried to obtain from a company registered in the British Virgin Islands. The deal fell through and Purple Surgical is attempting to sue the supplier for fraud.

Is the Government in Breach of ITS OWN ANTI-CORRUPTION STRATEGY?

Sam Bright

As [revealed](#) by *Byline Times*, a firm called Excalibur Healthcare Services – awarded a £135.5 million contract for the supply of ventilators – is owned by a company based on the Isle of Man, also considered to be a tax haven.

It is worth noting that there can be multiple reasons for setting up a company in a tax havens. However, principal among them are the tax benefits. It is also the case that using tax havens for corporate purposes is perfectly legal, and ultimately it is up to the Government to decide the recipients of public sector contracts, not the firms themselves.

My hope is that tools like mine can help citizens to make sense of complex and fast-unfolding stories and – above all – that greater transparency will fuel action, not apathy. At the time of writing, an [online petition](#) demanding a public inquiry into Coronavirus-related Government contracts has reached 100,000 signatures, meaning it will be considered for debate in [Parliament](#).

Just like reading one of those great Russian novels, we get out what we put in. The more we know about the central cast of characters, the better we'll be able to keep up with each new plot twist. Except, in our case, we also have a chance to rewrite the ending.

WRITTEN BY **Sophie Hill**

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