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."

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.

(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".

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.

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)...

... 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.