# Led By Donkeys’ daring renaming of Michelle Mone’s yacht spotlights pandemic profiteering scandal



At the Charleston literary festival earlier this month, members of the activist group Led By Donkeys, Ben Stewart and Oliver Knowles, shared a captivating narrative about their audacious 2023 stunt: renaming Michelle Mone’s yacht, the Lady M, to “Pandemic Profiteer.” What began as a cheeky act of resistance turned into a thrilling tale of mischief and bold intent, complete with an unexpected chase scene as they evaded security guards while racing back to their van after affixing a giant sticker to the luxury vessel. Originally, the group's ambitions had been even grander: they sought to commandeer the yacht and sail it back to the UK, presenting it to His Majesty’s Treasury in a gesture of protest against Mone’s controversial financial gains during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The notion behind this playful coup resonated deeply with the festival's audience, embodying a collective frustration at profit-seeking behaviour during a national crisis. Mone's admission of profiting £28.8 million through her company PPE Medpro, which supplied substandard personal protective equipment during the pandemic, remains contentious. Her financial gains, much of which stemmed from contracts awarded through the controversial VIP lane—designed to expedite government contracts for companies recommended by politicians—have sparked fierce debates about ethics in public procurement. Though Mone has denied wrongdoing, and her family’s assets are now under scrutiny following an investigation by the National Crime Agency, the sense persists that this episode reflects broader systemic issues within UK governance.

In a context where societal trust is waning, acts of public resistance, such as Led By Donkeys’ initiative, serve as poignant reminders of the accountability owed by those in positions of power. Mone's husband, Doug Barrowman, infamously remarked that their family was “always going to benefit” from their privileged standing in business—a sentiment that has drawn ire, particularly when viewed alongside the suffering experienced by many during the pandemic. The spectacle of a yacht renamed to highlight such discrepancies speaks not just to a singular act of protest, but to a yearning for justice that many in the audience felt, particularly in light of Mone's recent personal and political unraveling.

The implications of Mone’s actions reverberate across the socio-political landscape, reminding us that governmental competence and ethical conduct in business are not merely optional but essential. The Led By Donkeys installation also draws attention to the collective responsibility to confront power. Their emotional art can provoke an awareness that transcends any single misdeed—it offers a balm against despair by insisting that we bear witness to injustices, whether they manifest in financial misconduct or grave humanitarian crises, such as the tragic outcomes of war.

Amid an audience drawn together by a shared sense of moral outrage, Knowles and Stewart were met with a standing ovation at the end of their talk—a spontaneous display of support that transcended the usual confines of applause, encapsulating a communal commitment to standing against the malaise of governance. The collective experience of witnessing their audacity allowed an exploration of both societal grief and the possibility of change, nudging those present to consider the significance of their voices and actions in the face of wrongdoing.

This episode encapsulates a striking moment in contemporary dissent—a blend of humour, seriousness, and a collective demand for accountability that ultimately may shape the narrative of our socio-political landscape in the years to come.

## Reference Map

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/led-by-donkeys-wanted-to-confiscate-michelle-mones-yacht-but-settled-for-renaming-it-it-was-still-a-coup), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/led-by-donkeys-wanted-to-confiscate-michelle-mones-yacht-but-settled-for-renaming-it-it-was-still-a-coup)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/led-by-donkeys-wanted-to-confiscate-michelle-mones-yacht-but-settled-for-renaming-it-it-was-still-a-coup), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/98d3cdf0-f2bc-4038-9d6e-1e2b5c75f38a), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/9261f4a40b80fd986f6d0135c412367b)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/647f32ba-05d3-4906-b7b8-b41dca599921), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/17/how-the-michelle-mone-scandal-unfolded-200m-of-ppe-contracts-denials-and-a-government-lawsuit)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://news.sky.com/story/baroness-mone-admits-she-stands-to-benefit-from-ppe-contract-13032463)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/led-by-donkeys-wanted-to-confiscate-michelle-mones-yacht-but-settled-for-renaming-it-it-was-still-a-coup> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/26/led-by-donkeys-wanted-to-confiscate-michelle-mones-yacht-but-settled-for-renaming-it-it-was-still-a-coup> - In May 2025, Zoe Williams recounted how the activist group Led By Donkeys renamed Michelle Mone's yacht, Lady M, to 'Pandemic Profiteer'. The original plan was to seize the yacht and sail it to the UK to deliver it to His Majesty’s Treasury. The article highlights Mone's £28.8 million profit from PPE Medpro, a company she and her family benefited from, and discusses the broader implications of profiting from a national emergency. It also touches upon Mone's current situation, including her leave from the House of Lords and asset freezing by the National Crime Agency.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/98d3cdf0-f2bc-4038-9d6e-1e2b5c75f38a> - In June 2024, the Financial Times reported on the arrest of a 46-year-old man in Barnet, London, in connection with £200 million worth of UK government contracts awarded to PPE Medpro during the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Crime Agency detained the individual on suspicion of conspiracy to commit fraud and attempting to pervert the course of justice. PPE Medpro, owned by a consortium led by Doug Barrowman, husband of Conservative peer Baroness Michelle Mone, faced controversy over the suitability of the equipment supplied. Mone admitted to benefiting from the contracts and using her influence to secure them. The Department of Health sued PPE Medpro in 2022 for breach of contract, alleging that £122 million worth of medical gowns were inadequately packaged. The NCA began its investigation in May 2021, freezing approximately £75 million in assets linked to Mone and Barrowman. Both have denied any wrongdoing.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/9261f4a40b80fd986f6d0135c412367b> - In December 2023, the Associated Press reported that Michelle Mone, a member of Britain's House of Lords, admitted to lying about her connections to PPE Medpro, a company awarded significant government contracts for COVID-19 protective equipment. Mone regretted her denials and threats to journalists regarding her involvement. Her husband, Doug Barrowman, led the consortium that owns the company, and Mone benefited financially from the contracts. Despite acknowledging her error, Mone claimed she and her husband were scapegoats in a larger scandal involving government spending during the pandemic. PPE Medpro received over £200 million in contracts, but millions of supplied surgical gowns were deemed unusable, leading to government breach of contract actions and a National Crime Agency investigation. The U.K. government's VIP lanes for contracts, giving preferential treatment to recommendations from politicians, have been heavily criticized. Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden defended these lanes, stating that any fraud would be pursued through civil and criminal investigations.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/647f32ba-05d3-4906-b7b8-b41dca599921> - In January 2024, the Financial Times reported that an Isle of Man company linked to Doug Barrowman, Smartpay Limited, allegedly misled a client by concealing its offshore status to benefit from lax tax regulations on the island. Documents revealed that Smartpay presented itself as a UK entity but was actually registered in the Isle of Man, running a tax avoidance scheme to minimize taxable wages by issuing loans to workers. The recruitment agency Fuel Recruitment, which only works with UK-registered companies, believed it was dealing with the UK entity, unaware of the Isle of Man registration. The firm's activities aimed to sidestep HMRC scrutiny. Barrowman and his wife, Baroness Michelle Mone, face criminal investigation over controversial COVID-19 government contracts won by their company PPE Medpro. They deny any wrongdoing, as does PPE Medpro. The Knox Group of Companies asserts that Smartpay operated openly and settled all taxes, dismissing claims of misleading practices.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/dec/17/how-the-michelle-mone-scandal-unfolded-200m-of-ppe-contracts-denials-and-a-government-lawsuit> - In December 2023, The Guardian detailed the timeline of the Michelle Mone scandal, highlighting the £200 million in government contracts awarded to PPE Medpro, a company linked to Mone and her husband, Doug Barrowman. The article covered the initial denial of involvement, the revelation of Mone's personal recommendation of the company through the VIP lane, and the subsequent legal actions, including a lawsuit by the Department of Health for breach of contract and unjust enrichment. The piece also discussed the broader implications of the scandal on government procurement processes during the pandemic.
7. <https://news.sky.com/story/baroness-mone-admits-she-stands-to-benefit-from-ppe-contract-13032463> - In December 2023, Sky News reported that Baroness Michelle Mone admitted to standing to benefit from a contract between the government and PPE firm Medpro. The Conservative peer and Ultimo bra tycoon had previously conceded she made an 'error' in publicly denying her links to the firm, which was awarded huge contracts during the pandemic and is being investigated by the National Crime Agency (NCA). PPE Medpro was awarded government contracts worth more than £200 million to supply personal protective equipment after Mone recommended it to ministers. The article also covered the timeline of events, including Mone's emails to Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove and Tory peer Lord Agnew, the incorporation of PPE MedPro, and the subsequent legal and investigative actions.