

# The closed-door contracts flourishing in these COVID times

*Increasingly, government contracts appear to be flying out the door with limited checks and balances.*

Georgia Wilkins – *Crikey* – 21 September 2020

<https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/09/21/limited-tender-covid-19-contracts/>

Secrecy has been a cornerstone of the Morrison government — whether it’s sending in police to raid the homes of journalists or maintaining secrecy around the trial of Witness K and his lawyer.

This is no less true in the murky world of procurement, where government contracts appear to be flying out the door with limited checks and balances.

The latest contract to avoid a competitive process was awarded to aged care “disruptor” Mable, a company which *Crikey* reveals has [deep links to the Liberal party](#).

The \$5.8 million contract from the Department of Health was awarded on a limited tender basis, meaning the government approached Mable to provide the services it needed, rather than putting it out to market.

A limited tender, by its nature, is [less competitive than an open tender](#), as it does not give other suppliers an opportunity to bid for the tender.

## Aspen Medical

Mable is not the first company to benefit from a limited tender contract since COVID began.

Aspen Medical was one of the first to clip the ticket on the government’s pandemic response. The firm, which employs [former Liberal health minister Michael Wooldridge](#) as one of its key lobbyists, was sent in to deal with the Ruby Princess debacle, and has also been awarded millions to help clean up the aftermath of the catastrophic aged care outbreaks, including Newmarch House in western Sydney and St Basil’s Home for the Aged in Melbourne.

Since March the Morrison government has awarded the company an eye-watering \$1.2 billion worth of contracts, including a \$62 million limited tender contract in July.

## Resolve Strategic

The body handpicked by Morrison to lead Australia’s post-coronavirus economic recovery, the National COVID-19 Commission (NCC) has been at the [centre of the debate](#) about the government’s perceived lack of transparency.

It's no surprise then that the group, led by former Fortescue executive Nev Power and featuring former Dow Chemical executive and current Saudi Aramco board member Andrew Liveris, has awarded multiple government contracts on a limited tender basis.

One recipient of those contracts is Resolve Strategic, a company set up by long-time Liberal party pollster and former Crosby Textor researcher Jim Reed.

Resolve Strategic has [received](#) more than \$1 million in limited tender contracts from government departments since April, and has also landed itself a position on the government's coveted go-to panel for urgent work.

The company's first contract with the government, worth half-a-million dollars, was arranged through the NCC in May and was the subject of scrutiny at a Senate committee hearing. The company was then handed another \$502,000 limited tender contract by the Department of Treasury in June, again for market research.

## Woodside

The government's love of limited tender contracts extends beyond the realm of COVID-related services. As [Crikey revealed this month](#), oil and gas giant Woodside was handed \$8.8 million in June to advise the government on how best to decommission one of its own abandoned oil production vessels off the coast of Darwin.

The contract was awarded on a limited tender basis due to "extreme urgency or events unforeseen". Neither the government nor the company was able to say what these extreme circumstances were.

Woodside has strong political connections. Former Liberal resources and energy minister Ian Macfarlane, the country's longest-serving resources minister, currently sits on its board, and retired Labor MP Gary Gray was a senior executive to the resources giant before entering parliamentary politics. Former foreign affairs minister Alexander Downer also worked for the company after leaving politics.