

# The first minister is forced out of the Cameron-Clegg team – does it fit recent trends in ministerial resignations?

Jun 3 2010

*The relatively smooth handling of David Laws' resignation means that the coalition government has survived its first key shock, less than three weeks into office. [Gita Subrahmanyam](#) considers how this baptism of fire fits against the longer-term pattern in UK government since the 1990s for financial and sexual scandals to play a more prominent role in resignations, especially under Conservative governments.*



The Liberal Democrats, in the person of David Laws, have made constitutional history this week – but for mostly the wrong reasons:

- Laws is the first-ever post-war Liberal Democrat cabinet minister to have resigned from office.
- He is the first Liberal Democrat or Liberal minister to have resigned because of a financial scandal.
- He is the shortest-serving cabinet minister in modern political history.

However, the swift resolution of the crisis when Laws speedily resigned, his dignified manner of going, plus the unique features of the case to do with his homosexuality, have also created some offsetting factors:

- He is the first minister accused of a financial misdemeanour who has attracted widespread public sympathy. Nick Clegg, his party leader, described Laws' financial malfeasance as a by-product of the 'cruel invasion of his privacy' by the press.
- If this interpretation gains traction, then Laws' case may begin to reverse the rising trend in calls for ministers' resignations that has characterised the past few decades in British politics.

In Britain ministers are held accountable through their actions and are expected to resign if they disagree with colleagues' policy, perform poorly in their department, or get involved in scandal. There are two formally enunciated aspects to ministerial responsibility: individual ministerial responsibility and collective cabinet responsibility. The first relates to what a minister is responsible for in terms of his or her departmental responsibilities. It can be simply defined as those aspects of government business for which s/he may have to answer questions in parliament, or it may refer to a minister's personal conduct. Collective cabinet responsibility means that every cabinet minister is responsible for the conduct of cabinet as a whole; that is, ministers are duty-bound not to criticise any aspect of government policy.

During the first half of the twentieth century, ministers were called to resign only if they disagreed with government policy or were judged to have performed badly in their portfolio responsibilities. Sustained or serious calls for ministers to resign for any other reason, that is calls backed by substantial sections of the press or by the opposition parties, were relatively rare. Partly this reflects a climate of press and public deference to the UK's elites. The consequence of this 'restraint' was that one-third of all calls for resignation, and the bulk of all resignations tendered, were because of policy disagreements between a minister and the PM or the government line.

Nevertheless, there were some major financial scandals early in the twentieth century. In 1913 Asquith's Liberal administration was accused of engaging in the sale of honours for party funding. But none of the ministers involved resigned and the issue was hushed up. The issue of selling of peerages returned under Lloyd George's premiership, and certainly became involved in the 1922 collapse of the Conservative-Liberal post-war coalition government, and in the reasons why Lloyd George never returned to office. But again the whole affair was conducted in a 'sotto voce' way.

From then on until John Major's administration (starting in 1990), financial scandals were rarely cited in calls for ministers' resignation. MPs and ministers were prone in this period to portray the UK as a much 'cleaner' polity than any other, with 'cash for honours' only a distant memory. As our Table below shows, in an average four year term of office a government might expect between one and two resignations, mostly for policy reasons or poor performance.

## The total number of resignations across governments, 1945-2007

		Of which, due to		
	Total resignations	Policy disagreements	Errors or poor performance	Scandals and other reasons
1945 to 1964	21	12	4	5
1964-79	25	16	1	8
Margaret Thatcher	16	7	7	2
John Major	25	8	4	13
Tony Blair	36	25	5	6

## The average number of resignations per year in office

		Of which, due to		
	Total resignations per year	Policy disagreements	Errors or poor performance	Scandals and other reasons
1945 to 1964	1.1	0.6	0.2	0.3
1964-79	1.7	1.1	0.2	0.5
Margaret Thatcher	1.4	0.6	0.6	0.2
John Major	3.9	1.2	0.6	2.0
Tony Blair	2.8	1.9	0.4	0.5

However, since the 1990s the same old themes of party malfeasance in fund-raising returned and John Major lost four ministers to the 'cash-for questions' scandal. Here Tory MPs were accused of being willing to ask questions in the House of Commons in return for direct cash payments. 'Sleaze' became prominent as a portmanteau term covering not only financial problems but also sexual scandals.

The parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009 to 2010 next involved a range of Gordon Brown's cabinet colleagues who were accused of dodgy practices such as illegitimately describing London pied-a-terre as their family home so as to claim larger expenses on a constituency home with a bigger mortgage as if it were their 'second' home. Two refinements of this practice over time were to 'flip' houses' status as first or second home so as to maximize expenses claims, and to tell HM Revenue and Customs a different story about which was the MP's primary home from the story being told to the Parliamentary office.

Danny Alexander, the Liberal Democrat minister who has replaced David Laws, is now being accused of having told different stories to the Commons expenses office and the taxman – that is, behaving hypocritically over capital gains. As a Treasury minister Alexander now has a key responsibility to persuade the maximum number of his fellow citizens to pay their taxes in full, so this is an interesting issue. So far there have been few signs that he also be 'hounded' into resigning by the press, but the issue may still have more to run.

Calls for ministers' resignations have grown significantly since 1990. In the 1940s and '50s serious or sustained calls for a minister to resign occurred only 3 or 4 times per year on average. This number grew slowly to around 5 serious calls per year in the period up to the end of the 1980s. However, since then the number of serious calls for ministers to resign have more than doubled in frequency to about 11 per year after 1990. Now, we do need to adjust here for increases in the number of ministers on the payroll – but, even after doing this, we still have 7 serious calls for ministers to resign per year – which is double the 1950s

level.

This change does not mean that there has been a substantial change in the behaviour of ministers. Rather, the press and media now routinely attack government ministers for issues that they mostly used to ignore or not comment upon. Whether standards in public life have substantially deteriorated is much debated, and has caused a range of new bodies to be set up since the 1990s. But there are few signs that the change of media behaviours is about to go away, nor that ministers or MPs have really taken to heart the lesson that deference can no longer be expected. However, the Laws case may shift public opinion somewhat on the role of the press in hounding ministers to resign.

Some commentators have termed the Laws resignation a sexual scandal, since it emerged that he had claimed expenses for a room he rented from his gay partner. If we accepted this classification then Laws would have been the first Liberal minister to have resigned for this reason. Until Blair's administration, every sexual misconduct case involved exclusively Conservative ministers, perhaps because the party has been so much stronger in its support of 'family' values than others. Most charges of sexual misdemeanour brought against Conservative ministers have resulted in their resignations. By contrast, only one (not very prominent) Labour minister so accused has resigned.