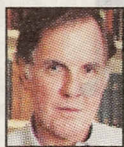


## Ex-Minister who's been through the trauma of resignation gives a telling insight



By **Jonathan Aitken**

AM shocked but not surprised that David Laws has resigned. He must be having a difficult and lonely weekend. I know, for I have been where he now is – a Chief Secretary to the Treasury engulfed in a scandal. The initial Westminster reaction to the Laws exposé appears to be more sorrowful than judgmental. There was little or no appetite, even on the Opposition benches, for taking the scalp of a capable new Minister who had made an impressive debut.

Yet David Cameron was right to be cautious in his response to the revelations. For there were complex issues raised by this personal drama which revolve around three interlocking questions of credibility, competence and confidence.

The credibility issue is personal. Will the public think that this is yet another 'nose in the trough'

# If he'd come completely clean to the House it might just have saved him – I wish I'd tried it

instalment of the long-running Westminster expenses scandal? Or should we feel special sympathy for David Laws's explanation that he covered up the facts because he was scared of being

'outed' in his private life. The latter view is quite a stretch. For there is virtually no serious criticism these days of politicians who have same-sex relationships in their personal lives. This particular relationship was well-known on the Westminster circuit. So why the great need for concealment?

Perhaps what was really being concealed by Laws was his hubristic error of judgment that this was a grey area of unethical claiming which would never see the light of day.

I understand such hubris, having been guilty of it myself in the saga of the Ritz hotel bill. But in a world where scrutiny and expected standards of parliamentarians is far tougher than it was when I sinned at the Ritz 15 years ago, surely Laws was being over optimistic (to put it politely) if he thought his cosy rental arrangements would never come to light.

The second area of concern relates to Laws's future competence to do the job of Chief Secretary. The worries here may have been the main reason why he had to resign, for the job of Chief Secretary is one of the most pivotal roles in government. You need industry and concentration to master the details in myriad opaque Whitehall budgets. Then you require an iron political will to be

be strong enough to repel all boarders if our broken public finances are to be repaired.

So a sudden ebbing of confidence in Laws as the guardian of public expenditure would have had the potential to do great harm to the Government in these critical three weeks before the June 22 Budget – unless the damage could have been repaired swiftly.

Unfortunately, that seemed unlikely.

Laws would face months of debilitating uncertainty before the new statutory body, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, passes judgment on its first ever case after the evidence has been sifted by the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner.

Would there have been a better way? Perhaps, if Laws had been willing to open up his moral conscience to the House of Commons rather than relying on technical arguments to the watchdog over his compliance with the rules about who is or is not 'a partner' to whom £40,000 of rent should or should not have been paid in parliamentary expenses.

My advice to Laws, even in standing down (how I wish, with the wisdom of hindsight, I had taken it myself!) is to

come completely clean in a personal

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concentration to master the details in myriad opaque Whitehall budgets. Then you require an iron political will to be the abominable no-man and axeman of public expenditure.

The hardest quality to develop is the aura of authority which enables you and the Treasury to win the crucial battles against spending Ministers. These battles take place before an all-powerful secret Cabinet committee officially known by the initials EDX (nicknamed the 'star chamber').

I used to prepare for up to 15 hours a day before the meetings of EDX. For the Chief Secretary is in effect the chief prosecuting counsel in this Whitehall court room of public expenditure judgment.

To win your case to set spending budgets at the correct levels, you need to brief yourself exhaustively and argue persuasively. Such undistracted preparations are essential if you are to convince the EDX jury of senior Cabinet colleagues and then defend the verdicts before Parliament and public opinion.

David Laws looked highly competent to fulfil these roles. But now, through a self-inflicted wound, his authority has been damaged.

In the public expenditure jungle, once a Chief Secretary is limping he's done for. If his authority ebbs away, the spending Ministers and their officials will scent blood and exploit weakness. If Laws himself had been personally distracted by his pressures, the weaknesses would have increased. This year of all years, the Treasury team needs to

## 'A sad but highly honourable decision'

down (how I wish, with the wisdom of hindsight, I had taken it myself!) is to come completely clean in a personal statement to the Commons. This is a rarely used but respected parliamentary procedure by which the House

hears the statement in silence.

If Laws apologises and honestly explains why he concealed a course of action which may look underhand to many, I think he will be heard with support and sympathy. For he will be speaking to colleagues who well understand that politicians can easily start to slide down the slippery moral slope of telling small lies of concealment out of fear (don't I know it!) which then grow through a mixture of naive hope and personal arrogance into big trouble.

The Commons will be a forgiving audience. So I believe Laws will be acquitted of greed, arrogance and any other mistake he may have made if he humbly confesses to breaking the rules with no ifs, buts or self-serving argument about technical compliance.

It was the grim prospect of a long, drawn out period of his authority as Chief Secretary draining away, together with the pressure of scrutiny on his personal life and judgment, that must have pushed Laws to resign.

It was a deeply sad but highly honourable decision for a Ministerial career which began and ended well and courageously.

What a tragedy for both David Laws and the Government that the beginning and the end were less than a month apart.

# Tory darling to fall guy

BEFORE the expenses scandal erupted, David Laws had become the surprise new darling of the Tory Party – even overtaking David Cameron and George Osborne in a survey of their own grass roots supporters.

Prior to yesterday morning's revelations, the Treasury Chief Secretary was the fourth most popular member of the Cabinet among Tory

activists. When the Conservativehome website asked readers to score those ministers with whom they were 'very satisfied', only Michael Gove (67 per cent) William Hague (66) and Iain Duncan Smith (65) beat Laws's rating of 64. Leader Mr Cameron scored just 56, and Laws' boss, Mr Osborne, only 51.

But when the poll was run again yesterday, Mr Laws fell to 38 per cent.