

## Fox's delayed decision to jump reflects his 'first offence' status – and perhaps Cameron's anxiety not to deplete the Cabinet's 'talent pool'

*Scandals leading to Cabinet ministers' resignation always involve a myriad of different causes and circumstances. The Fox-Werritty case adds some new and bizarre elements to this lexicon of mostly self-inflicted follies. Yet behind the apparent diversity lie some repeating patterns that show up clearly in the sophisticated statistical analyses of modern political science, as [Torun Dewan](#) explains. PMs often delay pushing out a minister while it is unclear that the controversy has begun damaging government popularity in the opinion polls and its longer run reputation. Once polling damage becomes evident, however – as it tends to do if a media 'wolf hunt' is sustained into a second week – then ministers are culled, or are allowed to resign 'of their own accord'. Normally also this process works –and government popularity returns to the status quo ante. Premiers also delay because the 'talent pool' available to staff the Cabinet can become depleted.*



Ministerial resignations take place for many different reasons, but they follow common 'event history' patterns that have been thoroughly explored and assessed in political science research. Liam Fox's decision to quit can be analysed in numerous different ways, in which we try to ascertain and weigh in the balance a detailed explanation of why he jumped – for instance, the exact reasons why Whitehall sources could brief Friday's *Financial Times* that: 'This is definitely a resignation issue'.

Yet ministerial resignations also have many recurring features, following 'event history' patterns that vary greatly in their empirical details but none the less have many fundamental similarities. A research team LSE gathered data on such resignation issues across the whole post-war period up to 2007. We defined resignation controversies as any issue over which there has been a serious call for the minister to resign. [In statistical analyses](#) we explored the effect of scandals on actual resignations, while carefully controlling statistically for the personal attributes of ministers and the characteristics of the governments in which they serve.

This research provides some clear answers to some common questions. For a start, is it better for the government that a minister tainted by a scandal resigns? Or does it do a Prime Minister and a government more damage to acknowledge that a scandal has force, and that opposition or media criticisms of a Cabinet minister were justified? In terms of the opinion polls the evidence is unambiguous: although scandals hurt governments in the short term, [these adverse effects are mitigated](#) if the minister goes.

Yet does this mean that David Cameron is clearly better off now that the government is rid of Fox? Perhaps not. One question is why have these stories arisen? Fox has been a divisive figure at the Ministry of Defence. He has been willing to challenge the status quo in many areas where entrenched defence and armed forces interests do not want to see reform. Some might see Fox's treatment as a smear campaign that can be traced back to his radicalism. And if so, the lessons drawn by other ministers may be to keep their heads down and to not risk being similarly abrasive in their departments. So if Cameron wants his ministers to be bold in tackling their ministerial briefs, he may have to offer them some protection when scandals arise. This is amongst several sound reasons why Prime Ministers often think twice before giving in to the temptation to be rid of scandalised ministers. These longer-run, strategic considerations may also help to explain Cameron's delays in making a decision on Fox – rather than the special weaknesses of Number 10 influence within the Coalition detected by Patrick Dunleavy in [his recent blog](#); or the need to balance Tory party



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factions, widely cited in the media.

Our research also generated insights into the chances of survival for Cabinet ministers who become implicated in a scandal. One reason why Fox hung on and hung on for so long was the fact that is his first scandal. The British data on resignations differs significantly from the rules of baseball – by following a ‘two-strikes and you’re out’ rule. Cabinet ministers have a good chance of [surviving their first case](#) of becoming embroiled in a potential resignation issue. But few top politicians can survive a second such.

A factor that worked against Fox, however, was that his scandal came relatively early in the coalition government’s term of office. This means that David Cameron still had a range of talented alternatives available to replace Fox at the top of one of Whitehall’s largest and hardest-to-run departments. As time goes on, however, the talent pool of available potential ministers tends to become depleted. And so over time it becomes [harder for the PM to replace a competent senior minister](#), strengthening their incentive to defend their endangered colleagues for fear of ending up with someone worse as minister.

*For more analysis on ministerial turnover and reshuffles please see Torun Dewan’s [website](#).*

*His book [Accounting for Ministers: Scandal and Survival in British Government 1945–2007](#) (joint with Keith Dowding and Samuel Berlinski) will be published shortly by Cambridge University Press.*