

Sun special on a Minister in a muddle

HAS TARZAN FALLEN OUT OF HIS TREE?



By TREVOR KAVANAGH

THEY nicknamed lion-maned Michael Heseltine Tarzan.

Now, fighting for the future of Westland Helicopters, the Defence Secretary has to prove his courage in a duel of strength with Trade and Industry Secretary Leon Brittan.

The 6ft 3in ex-Guardsman seems to have taken a suicidal course in making the challenge.

Solo

Brittan is backed by the formidable bulk of Chancellor Nigel Lawson and the even bulkier Willie Whitelaw.

Heseltine has the surprise backing of Cabinet heavyweight Norman Tebbit.

But wild-eyed Tarzan is in his element as a solo performer.

He has been restlessly champing at the bit for two years in political obscurity at his Ministry of Defence fortress.

It was Brittan's Cabinet job that he wanted.

Heseltine made his own

fortune as a commercial whizz-kid and hoped to show he could have the same success as a Minister.

When the Conservatives were in Opposition, he was Shadow spokesman for economic affairs.

He was sent to Defence deliberately by Mrs Thatcher who wanted one of her strongest critics and rivals buried under a mountain of complex but politically boring paperwork.

In peacetime, Defence is the worst portfolio in Cabinet for an ambitious politician who craves the centre stage spotlight as Heseltine does.

Something had to give.

While his friend Peter Walker carefully cultivates support from anyone with influence, Action

Heseltine on the warpath

Man Heseltine loves the dramatic gesture.

He won the name "Tarzan" by seizing the Commons ceremonial mace and waving it outrageously over his head during a dull debate.

He often regrets that display of macho politics which saddled him with a reputation for impulsive fireworks.

Triumph

He has deliberately tried to counter that image by making all his high risk gambles pay off.

He scored a personal triumph in 1983 by crushing anti-nuclear protestors with an inspired propaganda visit to the Berlin wall.

But to his intense

frustration nothing has gone right since.

His bid for a huge £1.5 billion deal with America for star wars research ended in disappointment.

And he is still struggling to find out how France embarrassed Mrs Thatcher by snatching a £4 billion defence deal from Britain with a counter-bid at half the price.

Despite his Tarzan nickname, Heseltine knows he desperately needs to flesh out the bones of his political reputation.

For six years he has been a front-runner along with Peter Walker as a potential Tory leader.

Now at 52 he is sharply conscious that he is being overtaken by youn-

ger men who were once his political proteges.

Friends like Kenneth Clarke, 45, and Ken Baker, 51, both "Wets," have been catapulted into high-profile Cabinet jobs.

Home Secretary and former Ted Heath aide Douglas Hurd has sprung into the spotlight as a formidable rival for the top job.

Buried in Defence, Michael Heseltine is shut off from all the chances of making headlines.

And Mrs Thatcher has made it clear she sees him as a "long-term Defence Secretary."

Score

The Westland issue may mean little to ordinary voters but Mr Heseltine is convinced it will enhance his status among pro-Europe Tories.

If Westland is eventually shut down by an unsympathetic American conglomerate, Heseltine will score Brownie points as a courageous visionary who risked his job to keep a British company alive.