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Changes at the Northern Ireland Office

Dear Assistant Secretary

On Friday last, 12 June, the newspapers here carried the announcement that Sir Kenneth Stowe, Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office for (not quite) the last two years, is to become the new Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health and Social Security when Sir Patrick Naire retires next month. Sir Ken told me on Friday that he would actually be taking over at the end of this month. It was also announced that Sir Ken, who is 53, will be replaced at the Northern Ireland Office by Mr Philip Woodfield, aged 57, at present a Deputy Secretary at the Home Office.

Sir Ken's replacement is one of a number of changes at the Northern Ireland Office. Miss Joan Kelley has returned to the Treasury and Mr Ian Burns has been promoted to Under Secretary in London from Belfast and has replaced her in charge of financial, economic, commercial and social policy and of EEC questions. Mr Dempsey informed me that he found Burns, with whom he had lunch this week, fairly cold and hard. He is not likely to have any ideas, in Mr Dempsey's view, that would, in our terms, be considered imaginative. He saw his two main functions as: (a) oversight, looking for angles which individual Northern Ireland Departments might have overlooked or missed; and (b) European Community questions. His general view is that the real power in the NIO resides in the Belfast Office with the London office having more of a liaison function.

Paul Buxton has been promoted to Deputy Secretary in Belfast where he replaces Burns in charge of security questions and police administration.

Roy Harrington, formerly Atkins' Private Secretary, replaces Buxton in London in charge of security questions.

David Blatherwick replaces Tim Gee in Belfast as Assistant Secretary in charge of Political Affairs. This continues to be traditionally an FCO job. Blatherwick

was most recently in Cairo but served in Dublin from 1970 - 1973 and was awarded an OBE for his services there during a particularly difficult time. Patrick Eyers told Hugh Swift that to have been given this award, as Blatherwick was, at the age of 32, is virtually unprecedented within the FCO. Eyers described Blatherwick as a blunt North country man but as "exceptionally capable". Mr Dempsey knew Blatherwick in Dublin in the period 1970/73 when they were friendly. He would agree with Eyers' assessment of his capabilities. He always thought of him not as being "blunt" but rather as plain spoken, being always prepared to engage one in debate on one's own ground - a useful enough quality on Northern Ireland issues.

Eyers himself, of course, succeeded Newington as head of the Republic of Ireland Division of the FCO in March of this year. Michael Moriarty described the length of Ken Stowe's tenure to Hugh Swift as "on the short side but not outside the parameters". He said that Stowe was an obvious choice (because of his DHSS experience and because of his ability) for the post to which he is being appointed but that if he passed it up on this occasion he might never get it. "There is no more to it than that", he said. Ken Stowe, himself, gave ^{me} the same impression. He said that his background was in the DHSS and Sir Patrick Naire, whom he replaces, is one of Britain's outstanding civil servants. He will be Master of St Catherine's, in Oxford.

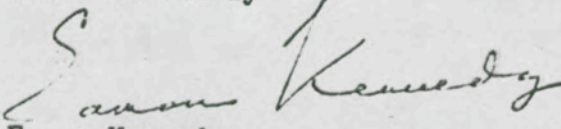
Moriarty also described Woodfield as an obvious candidate to succeed Stowe. He was, he said, very highly regarded in the Home Office. He had a range of relevant experience, including his service with Mountbatton's inquiry into prison security in November - December 1966, a period in the Home Office in charge of Prison Administration and a period, split between the Home Office and the infant NIO, when he was responsible for Northern Ireland constitutional questions. He and Moriarty are friends and neighbours. Moriarty said he was a "high flier" (as attested by his period in the 1960s as Private Secretary to several Prime Ministers) and described him as far-sighted and as having considerable political and constitutional sense. He said he is a different type of man from Ken Stowe, and does not in particular display the latter's driving energy. Ken Stowe also told me of his admiration for him and his respect for his experience. He especially mentioned Woodfield's service with Whitelaw in Northern Ireland.

The key question in these changes is, of course, the reason behind Stowe's move. In spite of Moriarty's comments, Stowe's period as official Head of the NIO is quite short. Stowe has been very forthright and farseeing, not only in conversation with us and with British officials but also in more general gatherings

about his ideas on the Northern Ireland problem and all the evidence available would suggest that, apart from his ability, he is both ambitious and energetic. It is hard to reconcile these characteristics with a simple desire to return to the DHSS or even with his becoming disheartened with the prospect of influencing policy. We tend to conclude that his views may have become incompatible with those of the Government including those of Humphrey Atkins, and that he may have been moved aside from the Northern Ireland Office. When I spoke to him on Friday last I sensed a perceptible tone of regret that he was leaving the NI Office and, as he said to me, he wasn't expecting it so soon. This view is supported by a well-connected press source who has told Daithi O Ceallaigh of rumours circulating that Stowe was pushed aside by what he termed the "bash the micks" group of Ministers in the NIO, led by Allison, and those of the same view in the Cabinet at large. He specifically excluded Whitelaw and Carrington from this group. He thought that Stowe's questioning of the basis of Conservative policies had been the cause of his transfer.

We have to be careful about reading too much into Stowe's departure but it may well be concluded that it will signal the decline of the sort of progressive approach he espoused and which we have always believed he succeeded in 1979 in selling to the incoming Conservative Administration. Such a change in emphasis would also, one would fear, signal a less receptive approach by the British Government to ideas put forward from Dublin, whether inside or outside the framework of the studies, and a similar hostility towards the SDLP. It might be added that while the other changes that have recently taken place are much less important than that at Permanent Secretary level, few of them could give us grounds for thinking that the new team will be more committed than the old to improved cooperation with Dublin or to a more active or flexible policy on the part of the British authorities. It must also be borne in mind that these changes are taking place against the background of rumours that Humphrey Atkins himself may be moved later in the Summer after two years of service in the hot seat of Northern Ireland, perhaps to the Lords. We have heard several rumours about this and as to who might replace him but nothing firm enough to report to you just yet.

Yours sincerely


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Ambassador

Mr David Neligan
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