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**5 August 1997**

**No of pages including this one: 3**

**To: HQ**
**For: D Cooney**
**cc D Mulhall**

**From: Belfast**
**From: Joint Secretary**

cc'd 6/8/97
PSM, PSS, S/S Ó hUiginn, Counsellors A-I, Mr Teahon, Mr Dalton, Dr Mansergh, Ambassadors London & Washington, Joint Secretary, Section, Box

**Subj: Change of NIO press officer**

1. It is generally accepted here that Andy Wood, the long-serving NIO press officer who resigned last week, is not going of his own volition.

2. It is an open secret that relations between Wood and the new Secretary of State have not been good. Very much in the Bernard Ingham mode, Wood is a dour and occasionally abrasive Yorkshireman who made little effort to develop a personal rapport with the new Ministers and may now be paying a price for that. His absence on leave over the Drumcree period was widely considered to have been ill-advised. He is also being blamed, many would feel unfairly, for the spate of negative coverage which the Secretary of State has been receiving of late (notably in the Sunday Telegraph)

3. More fundamentally, there is a basic conflict between the approach to press relations favoured by Wood, which has tended to involve emphasis on short-term crisis management rather than on the projection of a consistent and overriding message, and the more proactive and programmatic approach dictated by Peter Mandelson for the new Government.

4. In contrast to their Tory predecessors (notably Sir Patrick Mayhew, who did not disguise his disdain for the media and was content to leave this dimension entirely to Wood), the Labour Ministers take a very keen interest in the way in which their policies are communicated to the public. The private consultations which take place each morning between Mo Mowlam and her Ministers are believed to be very largely devoted to matters relating to policy presentation. Even in the wider sessions involving officials, one of the most frequent catch-words is that "presentation is as important as policy".

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5. In furtherance of this dictum, Peter Mandelson visited Northern Ireland two weeks ago to brief the assembled press officers of the NIO and NI Departments on what is expected of them under the new administration in terms of projecting achievements both in individual sectors and on the part of the Government as a whole. One key theme at this seminar, which was also attended by Mo Mowlam and her Ministers, was that both press officers and administrators are involved in a single public relations offensive on behalf of the Government, that each must go about this task proactively and that much greater integration of effort between both will be required..

6. Mandelson also underlined the need for press officers to pay constant attention to whether or not the Government's strategic objectives for a given period are being sufficiently communicated and to ensure that a single, coherent and focussed message about New Labour reaches the public.

7. It was decided that a review of all press work in Northern Ireland would be undertaken with a view to promoting this approach.

8. It seems that Wood registered a number of reservations during Mandelson's presentation and that the Secretary of State, Mandelson and Nigel Warner concluded shortly afterwards that he might not be the best person to take charge of the media operation here.

9. Wood has been indicating privately that he was "pushed" into leaving. Though he is a member of the British Government's Information Service and could in theory move on to another Government Department as press officer, it is considered unlikely that any other Department would accept him, given the background to his departure. He is more likely to leave the public service altogether and to seek alternative employment in Northern Ireland, his home for the past ten years.

10. As to his successor, the name of Romola Christopherson, who is currently the press officer at the DHSS in London, has been mentioned as one possibility. Described to us here as "a tough, no-nonsense individual", Ms Christopherson is widely respected by the Whitehall press machine, particularly for her success in improving Virginia Bottomley's public profile at the DHSS. She also worked in the NIO's London press office during the 1981 hunger-strikes (as a result of which she is known to many in the NIO) and in the No 10 press office. The general view is that she would be

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compatible on various grounds with the Secretary of State and her Ministers.

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