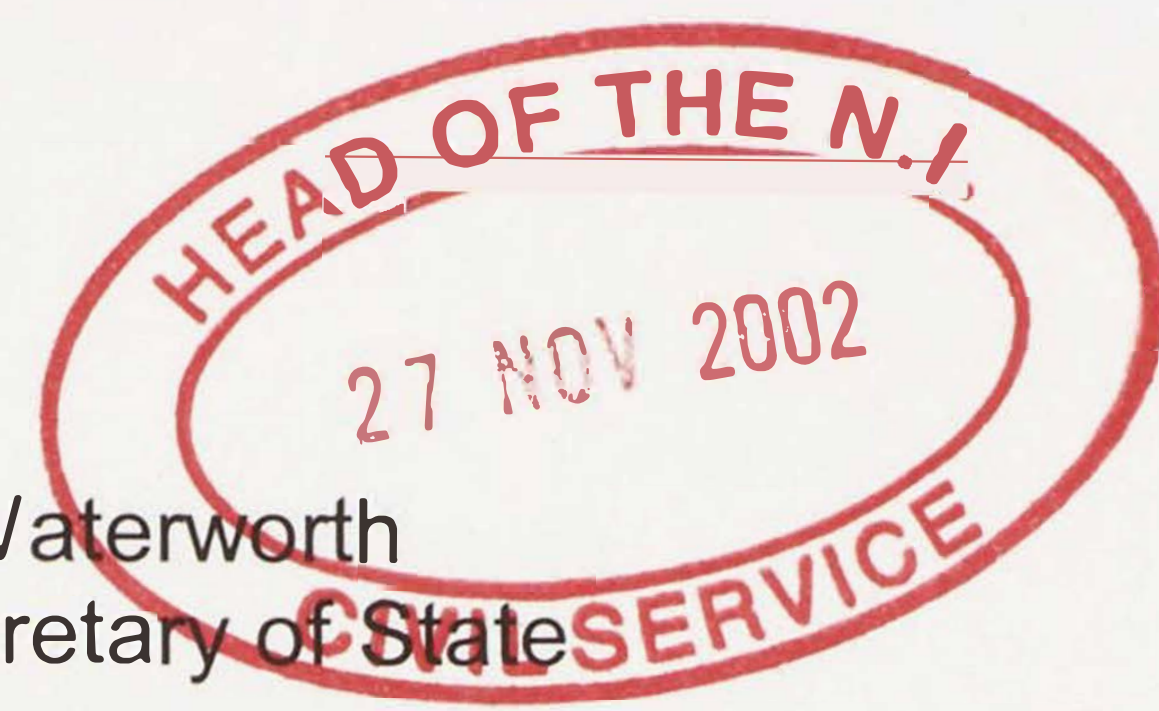


From: Peter May
Head of Strategy and
European Affairs Division

Peter Waterworth
PS/Secretary of State



27 November 2002

Copy distribution below

Joe Pilling
Nigel Hamilton

28/11

TEETHING TROUBLES: PRIVATE OFFICES

Joe Pilling's note of 4 November to Ministers asked for work to be done to speed the transition from devolution to Direct Rule in relation specifically to the operation of the Private Offices.

2. This note summarises the steps taken thus far. The approach taken has been an inclusive one in which a wide range of views have been sought. We are both grateful to Alison Coey for her assistance on many of the detailed issues surrounding the operation of the Private Offices.

3. Overall, it is clear that people want to make the new arrangements work and have done much to achieve that in spite of the difficulties caused by the absence of 'corporate memory' of how Direct Rule used to work.

4. In general, our perception is now that the basic systems are now operating satisfactorily. Increasingly the problems being brought forward are either of a one-off nature, such as would affect any Private Office under any political arrangement, or reflect old issues from a few weeks ago rather than current ones. Nonetheless, there remain a couple of outstanding issues to be resolved.

Specifics

5. We have agreed to take the following practical steps:

- management for the 4 travelling Private Secretaries (TPSs) will rest with Duncan Gilchrist who will meet regularly with the TPSs to develop the good communications required to ensure messages pass in both directions as needed;
- clearly defined roles for travelling and Departmental Private Secretaries and for central and Departmental diary secretaries have been set out. We have also agreed flow charts for the handling of correspondence cases and submissions. These have been shared with the relevant Private Secretaries who have agreed they provide a sensible basis upon which to proceed. This reflects both:
- a recognition that the Departmental Private Offices perform an important quality control role to ensure Ministers see only what they need to and that the advice takes account of the Westminster rather than devolved perspectives; and
- alongside that, acceptance that travelling PSs must have a sufficient understanding of all the major issues facing the Minister across their responsibilities to provide the necessary support as the Minister's initial port of call;
- the existence of 'central' Private Offices for Ministers without NIO responsibilities is currently required both to assist the maintenance of corporacy and to avoid further blips on performance as a result of any change. Their need might be checked again in six months if the anticipated political progress has not materialised;

- within the Ian Pearson and Angela Smith central Private Offices we do not see in the long-term a second Staff Officer (PS) role in addition to the TPS. These posts should ultimately become Assistant Private Secretary posts at EOI level. If however both the Minister and the individuals filling the posts wish to maintain the current arrangements we would advocate allowing the status quo to continue, reviewing the position in, say, March. This takes account of the planned short-term nature of the arrangements and the need to avoid any further disruption;
 - Staffing levels in the Jane Kennedy and Des Browne offices in Castle Buildings need to be supplemented. The short-term solution being sought is an additional SO to provide support to both offices and act as an Office Manager. This will be reviewed in March in parallel with above;
 - Noel Marsden and Kate Udy will offer support as required to travelling PSs (and Noel will also support Departmental officials) in respect of Westminster and Cabinet Committee business;
 - a dedicated support officer in NIO(L) to support Ian Pearson and Angela Smith is required and is being sought;
 - The NI Departments need to have access to Ministerial diaries to work to best effect. Detailed issues around diary classification still need to be resolved (see para 7 below);
6. In addition, a number of other steps are in train either separately or in conjunction with the needs raised by the work on the operation of the Private Offices. These include:
- guidance on how to handle the full range of Ministerial business is under production within OFMDFM and Ministerial clearance will be

sought shortly.

- copies of organisation charts, contact points and other relevant information either has been or is being circulated.

7. There remain a couple of outstanding issues in terms of the security classification and handling of the diary (on which further discussions with the NIO and NIPS may be needed) and some staffing issues.

8. The steps taken are designed to enhance the basic framework within which the Private Offices can operate. There are likely to be further specific issues to be sorted out reflecting the realities of Private Office life. However, if you or copy recipients feel there remain wider systems issues to be resolved, it would be helpful if you could let us know.

Peter May

Peter Waterworth

PETER MAY

PETER WATERWORTH

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