

**International Society for  
Soil Mechanics and  
Geotechnical Engineering**

**Time Capsule**



### **Professor John Burland remembers the crisis due to the sudden death of the Secretary General, Professor Kevin Nash in April 1981**

On the evening of Monday 27<sup>th</sup> April 1981, I was working on site in Brazil when I received a message to say that someone from England was trying to contact me urgently. As it was late at night in the UK I left it until 6am the following morning to phone the number I had been given. I found myself talking to Mel Nash whom I knew well. She explained that Kevin Nash had died peacefully of a heart attack on 24<sup>th</sup> April (his birthday). The Stockholm International Conference was due to be held in June preceded by a meeting of the Executive Committee. She had spoken with the President, Professor Masame Fukuoka, and would I please take on the role of the Secretary General to see the Conference through! How could I possibly refuse?

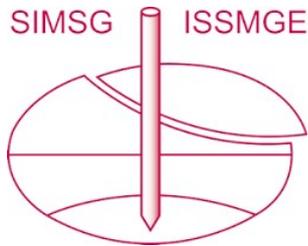
During May 1981 my diary relates that I spent half my time at King's College London where Professor Nash had been Head of Department, and half my time at Imperial College. Kevin Nash's Secretary, Hazel Webb, handled all the ISSMGE correspondence and if anyone was a hero coming through this crisis it was Hazel as she had accompanied Kevin to previous ISSMGE Executive Committee meetings, knew everyone, took the minutes of the Executive Committee meetings and handled all the correspondence.

The minutes of the Stockholm Executive Committee meeting begin with the following opening remarks by the President:

*The President reported on the sad death of the Secretary General, Professor Kevin Nash, and what a grievous loss this would be to the Society. He was appointed Secretary General in 1968 and since that time had worked selflessly for the Society. It was under his careful guidance and vision that the Society became amongst the most important in the civil engineering world. A very large number of letters from National Societies, organisations and individuals, paying tribute to the immense contribution Kevin Nash made to our Society had been received and his great foresight and wisdom have steered the Society safely through many difficulties. Kevin was a very modest person and for this reason it is perhaps only those who had had the privilege of working very close to him who fully appreciated what immense resources of courage and wisdom he had to draw on.*

The President went on to say that rapid action was needed and the Executive Committee was asked to endorse the appointment of Professor John Burland as temporary Secretary General which he had agreed to do for four months.

I recall that the election of the President to succeed Professor Fukuoka caused some excitement as one of the candidates was Professor Victor de Mello who had been on an overseas consulting job and was having difficulties in getting flights to Stockholm. However his dear wife Maria Luisa was very active and effective in lobbying delegates on behalf of Victor! We received a flow of messages reporting his progress towards Stockholm and he arrived dramatically just as the votes were being counted. The minutes of the meeting show that he was elected by a very clear majority.



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Much discussion took place during the Executive Committee Meeting on the procedure to be adopted for the appointment of the next Secretary General and the following motion was adopted:

*Considering the present emergency, the Executive Committee delegates to the President under Statute 34, the authority to appoint the next Secretary General in accordance with Minute 58(a) and to report to the next Executive Committee Meeting.*

Accordingly, Professor Victor de Mello appointed Dr Parry as Secretary General and this appointment was endorsed at the succeeding meeting of the Executive Committee which was held in 1983 in Paris.

A final action of the Stockholm Executive Committee Meeting was to institute a gold medal to commemorate the contribution Professor Kevin Nash had made to the Society and to foster its ideals. The title of the medal is KEVIN NASH GOLD MEDAL OF THE ISSMGE. It was further agreed that the medal should be awarded to a person who, through distinction as an engineer, through international contributions to engineering practice and education, through contributions to international good will, and through service to the International Society, has made a major contribution to fostering the ideals and goals of the International Society for Soil Mechanics and Geotechnical Engineering throughout the world. The first award of this medal was made to Professor Harry Seed in 1985.

The crisis created by the sudden death of Professor Kevin Nash had been successfully overcome and there was a most appropriate and satisfactory outcome.