

Former U.S. Ambassador Rejoins Kilpatrick Townsend In D.C.

By **Christine Powell**

Law360, New York (February 2, 2017, 8:05 PM EST) --

Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton announced on Thursday that the former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Council has rejoined the firm as a partner on its Native American affairs team after stepping down from his role and will work from its Washington, D.C., office.

Keith Harper, who the firm said was the first ever citizen of a federally recognized tribe — specifically, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma — to serve as a U.S. ambassador, told Law360 on Thursday that he had resigned from the position as of Jan. 18 and began working at Kilpatrick Townsend again on Feb. 1, after making a transatlantic move from Geneva, Switzerland.



Keith Harper

He said that he had “decided directly after the election that [he] would not seek to stay in the new administration” and that he was excited about the opportunity to return to the firm, where he had worked from 2006 until 2014, when he took on the ambassadorship, for which he was nominated by former President Barack Obama.

Kilpatrick Townsend was “at the top of” his list of places to transition to after making that decision, he said. “It sort of just made sense, so the firm and I had discussions and we agreed on a way to rejoin the partnership,” Harper said. “I’m very glad to be back, working with colleagues who I have the greatest respect for and who care not only to serve their clients well but to serve the greater good of the society.”

Harper has an impressive resume, which includes not only his role as an ambassador, but as a principal adviser and chair of the Native American domestic policy committee for the Obama presidential campaign from 2007 to 2008, according to the firm.

Prior to his first tenure at Kilpatrick Townsend, during which he was chairman of its Native American practice group, he was a senior staff attorney and head of the D.C. office for the Native American Rights Fund from 1995 to 2006, the firm said.

From 2001 to 2007, he served as an appellate justice on the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Court, and from 2007 to 2008, as a supreme court justice on the Supreme Court of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, according to the firm.

Harper also worked on protracted litigation alleging that the U.S. Department of the Interior grossly mismanaged a trust account that Congress established in 1887 to hold the proceeds from government-arranged leases of Native American lands, which resulted in a landmark \$3.4 billion settlement.

He began representing the class, which was initially led by the late Blackfeet Nation citizen and activist Elouise Cobell, when the suit was filed in 1996, and it became the “principal thing” he worked on for years during his time at NARF, which is a nonprofit, he said.

Harper’s work on the dispute did not stop when he made the jump to private sector and joined Kilpatrick Townsend in 2006, as the firm had by that point joined the class’ legal team, he said.

The settlement — reached in 2009, approved by Congress in 2010 and upheld by the D.C. Circuit in 2012 — called for hundreds of thousands of class members to receive roughly \$1.5 billion in total payments and for the federal government to create a \$1.9 billion trust land consolidation fund to buy fractional land interests in Indian Country.

Now, back at Kilpatrick Townsend, Harper’s practice will be focused on Native American affairs and litigation, according to the firm.

He said he hopes to “aid tribes in achieving the goals that they define for themselves. I have a lot of great colleagues who have the same vision, and I look to collaborate with them.”

At the same time, Harper also aims to broaden the scope of the firm’s international work. “I’m open to doing representation within the international sphere,” he said. “I think that the work that I’ve done under the Obama administration has afford me some experiences that I hope to continue to engage in.”

--Editing by Stephen Berg.