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OF 21 Z NOVEMBER 94  
INFO IMMEDIATE NIO(B), NIO(L)  
INFO ROUTINE WASHINGTON, EU POSTS  
INFO SAVING CG FOR BIS NEW YORK

FCO PLEASE ADVANCE TO PS/NO 10

SUBJECT: BERTIE AHERN, THE NEXT TAOISEACH?

SUMMARY

1. Brief profile of Ahern, the new Fianna Fail leader. Young, pragmatic deal maker. A committed constitutional republican, successful Minister for Finance and lifelong Manchester United supporter. Recommend that if he becomes Taoiseach, Prime Minister should send message inviting him to visit London soon.

DETAIL

2. At 43, Bertie (baptised but never referred to as Bartholomew) Ahern is the youngest ever leader of Fianna Fail. A cheerful down to earth and unpretentious North Dublin politician, his strengths are his popular touch, negotiating skills and unrivalled local constituency base, built up on the street.

3. Educated at University College Dublin, he qualified as an accountant before being elected to the Dail in 1977 at the age of 26. He was Assistant Whip 1980/81, Party Spokesman on Youth in 1981, Minister of State and Chief Whip in 1982, and Minister for Labour 1987-9 and 1989-91. In 1992 he succeeded Albert Reynolds at the Department of Finance. He was Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1986-7. He made a half-hearted attempt to succeed Haughey in 1992, but withdrew in favour of Reynolds. He has long insisted that the party leader should operate by consensus.

4. As Minister for Labour Ahern gained a reputation by his successful interventions in industrial disputes, particularly in the public sector. He took part in the inter party negotiations which led to the coalition governments formed in 1989 (with PDS) and in 1992/3. The relationships he has forged with key Labour figures will be crucial in any negotiations to renew the Coalition in the next week or so. He has shown an

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ability to master details and to assess the other side's bottom line, together with firmness. Despite his [dis]ingenuous manner, Charles Haughey once described him as one of the most devious and cunning men he knew.

5. As Finance Minister Ahern has impressed officials by his mastery of difficult briefs and insistence on sound economic policies and management reform of the public sector. He is a strong proponent of reform to make government more responsive to the needs of ordinary people - on the lines of the Citizens Charter. But he has not been particularly successful in controlling public spending.

6. Ahern has a strong Republican inheritance: his father was an IRA veteran of the War of Independence. While he demonstrates no anti-British hang-ups, he is said to retain republican gut instincts (I have never seen these on display). This gives him credibility in Fianna Fail, and should on balance be an advantage for us - for example in terms of selling amendments to Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution to the party and the electorate. But I know from my contacts with him that he has not been involved in Northern Ireland policy making.

7. Ahern makes no bones about the fact that he is separated from his wife (who has custody of their two teenage daughters) and has a stable relationship with his secretary. He is a keen supporter of the Dublin GAA team and of Manchester United.

8. The Prime Minister may remember sitting next to Ahern at lunch at the first regular summit in Dublin, with Haughey, in December 1991. If as expected Ahern becomes Taoiseach I would expect the Prime Minister to have no difficulty in developing a close and productive relationship. I recommend an early friendly message inviting him to London as soon as possible.