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Secretary-General
Department of Foreign Affairs

Call on Governor Bush of Texas

1. In the course of a visit to Texas last week I paid a courtesy call on Governor George W Bush at the State Capital in Austin. I was accompanied by Consul General Hickey and Mr John Kane, Honorary Consul.

2. After opening courtesies, and a conferral of honorary Texan citizenship, I briefed the Governor on the Peace Process, stressing the importance of the US role, and on economic progress in Ireland, where investment from the US was again one of the crucial factors and to the benefit of both countries.

3. Much of our meeting, which overran considerably the thirty minutes allotted to it, was however devoted to the Governor's reflections on his possible candidacy and the US position generally. The Governor congratulated us on the peace process and, with regard to our economic progress, took up the issue of the importance of an open trading system. NAFTA, he said was the best thing his father had done as President. He deplored people who tried to create walls between people or between nations. He is a friend of President Zedillo of Mexico, and believed in developing close bilateral relations wherever possible. By contrast, he instanced the alarm felt by the Mexicans at the position of John Sweeney of the AFL-CIO, because of the economic isolationism he espoused on a visit to Mexico City. He spoke approvingly of developments in the European Union and the single currency.

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4. On the theme of his political philosophy, the Governor said the Republican party believes essentially in individualism. The Democrats, by contrast, tended to think in terms of collective entities. This will impact on the coming Presidential campaign and on the policies to be adopted by Vice-President Gore, given his need for financial support from the AFL-CIO. The Republican message, properly and inclusively aimed at the individual, was potentially a very attractive one. At the same time, the Republican Party must decide whether it wishes to commit political suicide in the coming election through allowing the fundamentalist right-wing, which is using the party as a vehicle, to dominate. He took some pleasure, he said, from a recent attack on him by the fundamentalists. The Republicans will have to move with the times. A fatal weakness in Bob Dole's campaign was that it was backward-looking. The people should distrust any candidate who announced himself as, for instance, the new Ronald Reagan. Dole had also been weak on the diversity issue. He felt that potential candidates such as Jack Kemp or Libby Dole had essentially fallen between the stools and leadership would move to a younger generation.

5. The essential job of a President, he said, is to unite people. Nixon had been a failure in this regard and had generated divisiveness. Clinton had failed in that he had not shown the qualities of leadership and responsibility which people are looking for. In that regard the baby-boomer generation has still to prove itself politically as responsible political leaders. His own theme would be to show that it had the capacity to carry that responsibility, a role in which President Clinton had failed. Commenting - very lightly - on the President's difficulties, he said that, looking into his own heart, he knew that the average American was utterly uninterested in what was currently going on in Washington. He was himself a baby-boomer, and while he too had made mistakes, he believed that he had learned from these and had moved on. People who made no mistakes usually hadn't done very much one way or the other.

6. He considered foreign policy issues would be more prominent and significant in the political debate in the period ahead than was currently apparent. The US had to work out its role in the post cold-war world, probably through more sustained and

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painstaking involvement than heretofore. He had been struck in Israel by the extent to which people were crying out for American leadership.

7. I urged him to visit Ireland. He said there were three 'I' realities in American politics: Italy, Israel and Ireland. He had been to the first two, and would like to visit Ireland also. But he has, as he put it, "a few things" on his mind. He had to remain in Texas for the duration of the State legislative session and then the calendar for primaries took over. As he warmed to the proposal, however, he said that a visit might be possible after the primaries are out of the way.

8. On our way out, Governor Bush soliloquized in front of a picture of Sam Houston, recalling one phase of the Texan hero's life when he had succumbed to whiskey, taken a squaw and lived among the Indians. I wondered whether this was some subliminal allusion to the Governor's own "wild oats" phase. His only qualifications on his obvious interest in the Presidential nomination was whether he could make a real difference - otherwise the Governorship of Texas was a very fulfilling role - and, more operationally perhaps, whether his wife and two daughters could sustain the pressures of Washington. This last may also be a potential exit strategy relating to the very live issue of whether there were incidents from his reportedly hard-drinking and high-living younger days which could be used against him. He is reported to have hired a private detective to investigate himself, a somewhat surreal move aimed at assessing what his opponents were likely to be able to dig up. (He is now living an exemplary life as a dutiful family man and pillar of the Methodist church).

9. Overall it was easy to see why the Governor is emerging as the front-runner on the Republican side. In spite of right-wing opposition to him, the polls show his strength as the fall-back choice even for the right. He dominates a key State, with an outstanding track record in it and has fostered an emphatically conciliatory policy both towards his Democratic opponents in the state and to ethnic minorities. (He makes a point of speaking Spanish to Hispanic audiences). He benefits from his brother's role in Florida (he allowed that Florida had now obligingly advanced the

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date of their primary), and the formidable collective Bush family fund-raising capacity.

10. He comes across as a very engaging and energetic personality and should do well both in personal contacts and public debate. In spite of his disclaimers about the past, he has absorbed from President Reagan the importance of a folksy and unthreatening style as a man of the people, and from President Clinton the strategy of playing the sensible pragmatist, far removed from the partisanship of his own party. His relaxed style and ability to project a sense of ease with people will be a challenge for Vice President Gore, assuming that the private-eye finds no protruding skeletons blocking the high road to the Republican nomination.

Visit to Dallas

11. In addition to the call on the Governor, and the Attorney General and Secretary of State of Texas, I was guest of honour at a dinner in Dallas on 25 January for supporters of the American-Ireland Fund. The following day, I spoke to a largely business audience of six or seven hundred at a lunch-time event honoring Mayor Kirk of Dallas who has been selected as Grand Marshal for this year's St Patrick's Day parade. I also met with the editorial board of the Dallas Morning News and gave an interview to the same paper on developments in Ireland. On Wednesday I gave an address at the Dallas Committee on Foreign Relations.

Sean O'Huiginn
Ambassador

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