

Liam Cosgrave Oral History Interview – 8/5/1966
Administrative Information

Creator: Liam Cosgrave
Interviewer: Joseph E. O'Connor
Date of Interview: August 5, 1966
Place of Interview: Limerick, Ireland
Length: 5 pages

Biographical Note

Cosgrave, Irish Minister of External Affairs from 1954 to 1957, discusses John F. Kennedy's 1955 and 1963 visits to Ireland, among other issues.

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Liam Cosgrave, recorded interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, August 5, 1966, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Liam Cosgrave

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Oral History Interview

with

Liam Cosgrave

August 5, 1966
Dublin, Ireland

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Cosgrave, when did you first meet John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

COSGRAVE: I first met him in either August or September, 1955. I was Minister for External Affairs and he came here on a short, so far as I'm aware, unannounced visit. Certainly very few people knew he was here.

O'CONNOR: Do you know what he came for?

COSGRAVE: That I can't say except possibly to meet a Father Leonard [Joseph Leonard], who was a Vincentian Father and a friend of Mrs. Jacqueline B. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]. Father Leonard was at that time in All Hallows College, Drumcondra. He has died since.

O'CONNOR: Father Leonard has died?

COSGRAVE: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Oh, I see.

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COSGRAVE: And subsequently.... At that particular time of the year things are rather slack. The university and colleges are closed. Senator Kennedy, as he then was, was I think anxious to make a speech or at least meet some students. So far as my recollections goes, he spoke to the students in All Hallows, and I think answered some questions. I don't remember whether it was published in the papers or not, but the papers at that time would, of course, carry an account if it was. As Minister of External Affairs I invited him to lunch. And, as he was staying in the Shenbourne Hotel and was at that time moving around on crutches, instead of giving him the lunch anywhere else, we arranged that it be given in the Shenbourne. And present at the lunch were Mrs. Kennedy and Father Leonard and some others. I can't offhand remember them all. He stayed here, as far as I remember, a couple of days at the time.

The following year I was at the United Nations in New York and it was shortly after the Suez Crisis. And I went to Washington to see the then Under Secretary of State, Mr. Herbert Hoover, Jr. [Herbert Clark Hoover, Jr.]. On that occasion I was invited to lunch by a number of senators and congressmen including Senator Alexander Wiley, who was the ranking chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee—he was a Republican. And John Kennedy attended. On the actual day of the lunch quite a number of us had gathered and were talking, and when the lunch started Senator Kennedy was not present. He was detained at some committee meeting or some meeting of the Senate. And I always look back on the fact that when he came into the room the entire table, persons of both political parties gave—said, “Hello, Jack,” and gave a very friendly welcome, which I thought was of interest. We had the most enjoyable, interesting lunch. And I had a conversation with him, referred to our previous meeting. I did not see him again then until he came here as President. I was one of those who went out to the airport to meet him and subsequently met him at a reception here at the Iveagh House and also at dinner. Of course, on this occasion there was hardly anyone in the country who didn't know he was here. He'd become very famous. He referred to his previous visit and I thought it showed an extraordinarily good memory. He said, “Father Leonard.” And I said, “Yes, do you want to see him? He's at, I suppose, All Hallows.” So, he wanted to get in touch with him. But he remembered that he'd met him on the previous occasion.

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O'CONNOR: Well, did you think his visit was a good visit? Do you think it was handled.... This visit was handled by the opposition, is that correct, by the party in power now?

COSGRAVE: Well, it was handled as a State visit of course. It was handled.... But, it was, of course, a visit to the nation. He spoke in our, in the Dail and addressed a joint session—the only case in which a foreign statesman or politician had addressed the parliament here. And in fact, I think possibly the only occasion—there may have been one earlier occasion on which a speech was made by the late Tim Healey, who was governor, generally addressed the Dail or if at all possible the Dail and

Senate. But it was the first occasion that a foreign statesman addressed either House. On a previous occasion the late Mr. Nehru [Jawaharlal Nehru] was admitted to the floor of the Dail when we were in government in 1949 or '50. That was an exceptional arrangement. He just sat on the floor during question time and listened to the debate. But Senator, or President Kennedy addressed the Houses and made a very interesting speech. He got, of course, a tumultuous welcome. His visit created a great impression. He endeared himself to the people everywhere he went. He had, of course, a very attractive manner, fine presence, and attractive friendly smile. And he met people in Wexford, who were cousins, where his family came from. He also visited Cork, Galway and Limerick.

O'CONNOR: I wonder why the visit made such an impression. I wonder, it's hard for me to understand...

COSGRAVE: Well, I suppose the fact that he was of Irish descent. He was not strictly the first president of Irish descent, but certainly the one whose origins were quite clearly Irish. He also was the first Catholic. He had come here before. He had always stated that he was, and it was common knowledge in America and throughout the world, that he was of Irish descent. And his visit here followed shortly after what was probably his greatest public visit abroad, and that was his visit to Berlin. He came here immediately after that. And that visit was fresh in the minds of the people. A great many had seen

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it on television. His speech made there was in the minds of the people, and for that reason he probably created a very remarkable impression.

O'CONNOR: Well, with regard to his first visit, when he first met you in 1955 did you have any particular impressions of him at that time as an impressive man or an unimpressive man or good impressions or bad impressions?

COSGRAVE: No, my impressions were favorable. He was very friendly, matter of fact, devoid of pretense of any sort, good sense of humor, clear grasp of the essentials, the current international political situation, was reasonably familiar with conditions here. He was overcoming or had just shortly before had his serious illness...

O'CONNOR: Sure...

COSGRAVE: ...and those who didn't know were always struck by his boyish appearance. When you were nearer to him he didn't look quite so young. In fact, his face showed certain signs of the suffering he'd undergone. Probably two things that gave him the boyish impression: one was that he was tall and although not very light, he was not heavy and he had a very fine shock or head of fair

hair which, of course, gave him an impression of, or particularly from the camera point of view or those who were not close to him.... But I did notice on that first occasion that he looked somewhat worn. He also, at that time his hair was rather longer or less tidy than it became subsequently. When he was President he looked more carefully groomed. Possibly he had more time to do it whereas when he was here the previous time he was on crutches and I suppose it was less easy for him. But he certainly was a very attractive individual as a personality, very friendly, had a great memory for people, and always seemed to be in good humor. But at the same time he gave you the impression of being a man who had a serious outlook and was concerned with not merely American problems, but world problems.

O'CONNOR: You said he didn't have any pretense, you know,

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any pretense on anything. Do you think he retained that characteristic after he became President?

COSGRAVE: I thought so from the time I met him. Of course my contacts with him, when he was President, were very brief. Well, I had a few conversations with him here, but it was naturally brief. His sisters came with him that time. Mrs. Kennedy didn't come. But I thought he hadn't changed from that point of view.

O'CONNOR: Did the fact that there was an Irish President in the United States make any difference at all, or could you tell that it made any difference at all in Irish-American relations?

COSGRAVE: Well, it would be difficult to say whether it made any difference in the sense that our relations with the United States have always been of the most friendly character, irrespective of what government was there But I think we had a personal interest in John Kennedy when he was President. And people here took a much closer interest in American affairs. I think it is noticeable that the publicity given since and the interest in, say, President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson], is nothing like as great. But that was probably because President Kennedy had been here and he was of Irish extraction. So far as official relations go; our relations have always been most cordial. I suppose they have become even more cordial as the result of the election of President Kennedy.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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