

Dr. Brendan O'Regan Disk 10

JH: So, we are here again in Malahide with Dr. Brendan O'Regan. Now, as I was saying to you, the 1960s were a crucial period and certainly from about 1965 onwards and there was a very important relationship began to develop at that time between the IDA and Shannon Development and I would like to revisit that period with you today and to ask you to take us back to that period. To look at that relationship between the IDA and to look at some of the personalities involved, say Michael Killeen, would be very important to look at. So, maybe you could take us back to that time.

BO'R: Ok well, it was a very important time in regard to the IDA because they had got a chief executive who was quite evidently one of the best men they have had for a long time and he had a very big view of the island of Ireland and he could see quite plainly that we were in danger of becoming capital centralised to the detriment of those who lived in the capital and to the detriment of those who lived in the rest of the island and the Shannon Airport experiment, because it must be called that I think, which tied in with the Lindberg decisions in regard to how easy it could be to get from the new world to the old world. The feeling that we the Irish had a main part to play in that was very much in our minds and certainly was in the minds of Lemass and de Valera. de Valera appearing in a flying suit at an early date was his way of saying "well I know this is going to be of immense value to Ireland" so that those of us who were entrusted with the idea of running the airport at Shannon had already a pretty clear message that this was of

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immense national value. There was a great, from the very beginning, there was a strong patriotic strength of Irish character running through what went on at Shannon. I can remember at a very early stage being extremely annoyed because I heard a man from South Africa, he was British but he was addressing an Irish waiter, John Creed, with utmost disrespect. John Creed had done something quite tiny, made a tiny mistake, but he was being really dressed down to such an extent that I found myself immediately saying to the Englishman who had been dressing him down, "I understand that you have been in West Africa well, you are not in West Africa now, Don't ever talk like that to any of my staff like that again" I mean it was an over-reaction in a way and in another way it wasn't. It was suddenly a realisation that we, the Irish, were about to show what our real values were in the matter of serving people from across the world and that we could do it properly. In fact he was corrected for a non-error which can happen often, but my whole relationship to the running of the catering at Shannon was related to that feeling that we it was an opportunity for us to emerge from a position where we would have been regarded of not capable of handling as well as should be handled international traffic. But I knew we could do it, and in fact from the very beginning from that very first day at Shannon there was a..., there ran throughout the staff a feeling "we are being tested now to see whether we can handle something that is first class or not. We'll show them.

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JH: Could I just turn to the industrialization? When that began in the late fifties, the idea was in existence at that time, I think the idea had come into existence under an inter party government in the 1950s. It's been said, well Bernard Share would put it this way that right from the beginning there were suspicions, mutual suspicions and mutual tensions between the two agencies because of the convergence of interests.

BO'R: Yes,

JH: Because both I suppose, you might even put it as simply that it was a patch war. It was centralised development versus regionalised approaches to development and I would like to ask you about that at time, your memories of that, how that evolved, say, from the early days.

BO'R: My memory of it is, of course, that there was already a very good management organisation in existence in the IDA, and that Michael Killeen was a fairly outstanding member of that organisation and that they were endeavoring to bring about what was the first big step of Ireland towards moving away from poverty to industrialisation. Industrialisation was in fact what we knew from England was the secret for wealth and I felt that we were doing that and we were doing expertly through the IDA and I had great admiration for Michael Killeen and his group but I felt that I had fortunately got a job where it was impossible to show fairly sharply that we did have the ability to look after international industrialisation and that we could make a success of it and I had I think helped to inculcate

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that determination into each of the staff who, were working for us. I think that the IDA and of course Dr. Beddy, who was very vital in regards to industrialisation, would have had some worries about us but fairly quickly I think they began to accept that there was a spirit in the Sales and Catering staff that was quite exceptional and that they realised that they had been given a great chance and that we could continue to succeed on our own and We needed because of the extraordinary differences between aviation age and the industrial age, we had to do it as a separate thing. So I think the beginnings that we made at Rineanna rather than at Foynes, although at Foynes they were important because we were taking over from the British we were a very well geared operation and Captain Hedges who was the head of British catering worldwide, became quite a good friend of mine and brought me to London to his club and so on. I knew that we were doing something that was being well done anyway, we had to do it better. I suppose the real trial was the very first luncheon that we served in Shannon came from the Old Grand Hotel, nobody knew that of course, but it came from the Old round Hotel and it had been served by Maggie McArdle who was a great chef but certainly wasn't one to produce for Lord Headford to congratulate and she had produced the most wonderful, I had said the best meal you ever produced, it has to be cold because we haven't yet got the where-with-all to finish it off., but you'll have to produce it as cold. You mentioned Michael Killeen there....

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JH: There was also JJ Walsh who was on the board of Shannon, as you know he was the Chair of the IDA, and also on the board of Shannon and Michael Killeen was on the board of Shannon Development and CEO of the IDA. There was that cross membership of the two agencies.

BO'R: There was

JH: How would that have come about or who would have instigated it that cross membership, who would have seen that as being important at the time?

BO'R: Well, I think that there were several people under Lemass who were, Paddy Slattery was one of them, who were principal officers and were very able people and they saw that what was happening was an unusual situation and of course John Leydon who was the, I mean civil servants whom we should be eternally grateful to for, because he was the man who got us to handle the extreme dangerous situation we got into at the beginning of the war on regards to food and all that stuff. So, I'd say that Paddy Slattery and John Leydon.... John Leydon was, I think, probably the best secretary of a department that we ever had in this country and we had it at that time and helped to make the right decisions and gave the right backing as well and encouragement. John Leydon

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JH: That was the period too when Lemass ceased to be Minister for Industry and Commerce and moved on to be Taoiseach. Say in '59 I think that was?

BO'R: Yes, that appeared a great loss, I must say, to those who were involved that he should have moved and replaced De Valera, but of course we realised it was the right thing. But he was so involved in the whole question of the Department of Industry and Commerce that we felt very badly once he was gone but of course it came all right.

JH: When you say it came alright? Were you aware that you still... that you had retained his trust that you had retained his trust and retained his faith in Shannon were you still made aware of that after he had become Taoiseach?

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BO'R: There was a period of where he was so preoccupied with getting the other job that we felt we were lost but he quickly reinforced it. He had earlier given me an ok to spend £50,000 on ensuring the Shannon situation. This was £50,000 not taxpayers' money it was profit from the shop and the other things were moving. That £50,000 played a major part in making Sales and Catering which, was a catering operation, a development opportunity as well, and it had of course at the head of it a few very able people, Jack Ryan, who was the accountant who was always outstanding. He had been to school with me actually I knew him from that early date and his wife had been working with me in the Falls Hotel. So, he was somebody that I knew and that he was very clever. Joe McElgunn who was head of catering and each of those had got a new job and there was Peter Donnelly. Peter Donnelly had written a book and that is all I knew about him when I engaged him. He had written a book and I went to Trinity and got a look at the book, read enough of it to convince me that he was a convincing person. Of course, he was the secretary of the new company and was the best outstanding person in many ways he could visualise what was coming, how long it would take us to get to 500 people employed and so on, and how long it would go, how much it would go from that. So, I was very lucky to have had in the sales and catering the kind of people who had the ability to make a new decision, which, was, we are going to create a reason for aircraft to land down here. The basic idea was that we would show that there was a lot of

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revenue to be got from stopping down here to collect not just passengers, but freight.

JH: Could I just ask you about Lemass, in the middle of the 1960s, I think about '66 Lemass bowed out of national politics. He retired as Taoiseach and Jack Lynch took over at that period. Would you have been aware of any change after that, after Lemass's departure?

BO'R: Well, after Lemass's departure Industry and Commerce seemed to be static, as far as I was concerned. I had regularly had meetings with him and had encouragement with him in regard to the town. The idea of a town at Shannon couldn't have been promoted without his backing and we needed a town because we had to say to industrialists and your key staff will be able to live right alongside the factories. We got an all-clear from him on that and after that there was a question of one, two or three-storey buildings that would be built and he said "yes you can do it". So, I built three apartments for a very so that the executives of airports of people who were going to run the situation could live there and that was the first big step made by Lemass. Thereafter, we were building a town, I mean once that had been done, we were building a town. Of course, this was a totally new situation, there hadn't been built in Ireland a town since the Danes, I think, as far as we know. It passed Lemass, because Lemass saw it as are we going to be on the air map of the world and he saw Shannon as our way of being on the air map of the world.

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JH: Just there to wind up, you were saying there the department of Industry and Commerce appeared to become mordant almost or that your relationship didn't seem to develop after Lemass had resigned, or retired from politics. What would you say to the suggestion that, that was partly the result of the fact that you had, that Lemass had thought so highly of you and Shannon prior to that? That the cold winds began to blow when Lemass went and that some of the civil servants who might have resented perhaps, that good very solid relationship between yourself and Lemass and that might have been a factor later on?

BO'R: I'd say your pressing the right button now, (laughs) because what actually did happen at the particular stage was that I got a number of civil servants and not civil servant saying to me haven't you developed that enough now, Isn't it big enough? Why do you want a town, which is bigger than you have now? Why do you need the industrial site to be any bigger can you not stop now? Quite important people said that to me. Well that would be exactly the wrong thing because it is part of the very nature of Shannon that we have made an international airport here on the fringe of Europe and that it suiting the Europeans and the Americans to use it. We are able to give them certain pluses that they won't get from anybody else. But you have done enough and there's enough done to leave it alone now. They were worried I think that there might a white

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elephant there, I assume but that's the way to make a white elephant to leave it half finished. I think it has no danger of running into that situation providing the right things are said about it now that it is in fact Irelands air age development and has a lot to learn for Ireland from it and has a lot to learn for Shannon for it so we will see what happens.

JH: The Celtic tiger economy was built on the shoulders of Shannon if you want a metaphor.

BO'R: Yes, I said to Whittaker one day, we are doing it of course, you know, you are talking about it, but was what are you doing about it?

(Laughing)

BO'R: "Well that's not right now that's not quite right" he said, but I said that is what is happening. He wasn't too pleased with me.

JH: How did you get on with him, in general?

BO'R: I got on well with him, although one time he came to Shannon and he said to me, "you are really building all over the place here". "Well," I said "it's part of what we were supposed to do." Civil servants didn't fully understand what was going on at Shannon. They didn't fully understand the belief that if it

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wasn't done there would be no Shannon in the future. It can't go back now.

CO'C: It's quite interesting to see how the investment in Shannon is continuing; that there are new houses being built all over the town. The Shannon town centre is expanding at a tremendous rate, it's a building site again.

BO'R: It is

CO'C: It's very interesting to visit something that was maybe viewed as experimental and is now a solid economic success.

JH: Could I put something to you, it's a particular view that going back to that time in the early 70's the IDA believed what was good for Ireland, or what was good for the IDA was good for Ireland? There was a resentment of Shannon on behalf of people in the IDA. For instance, Shannon did its own advertising in the UK at one point and the IDA objected strongly to that. They felt this was their brief and I think it happened within your promotion in American as well. There was resentment to that. That would seem to have been a fairly important dividing of the ways between the IDA and Shannon.

BO'R: Yes

JH: Do you recall that period?

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BO'R: Well there was a period when I had a very close personal relationship with Gerry Dempsey of Aer Lingus and Michael Killeen and we used to have meetings with Todd Andrews and so on and I was onto the Northern situation at the time and I wanted them to authorise one of us to go and see the Taoiseach to get something done about the Northern situation. I said all we need to be told is that we are to co-operate with Northern Ireland and we'll quickly show them what can be done. Eventually, he said yes, and I was authorised after a dinner to represent the state agencies and I went to Lemass, not Lemass, I went to Jack Lynch. Jack Lynch says it sounds a good idea I think it can be done. Well I said it can be done, the faster the better. I said, "I'll do it so" "Well" he said "you can't do it until I clear it with the board, with the government." Of course, Haughey was on the government and he never got clearance from Haughey on it so it was never done. But it was.... I was raging I must say because it would have multiplied what we were doing in Co-operation North many times over. I mean Haughey didn't want what that would have brought about, which would have brought about a working arrangement between North and South of all that state companies. We can talk about the political end of it later on. But what's happened now is we have got the political agreement before the other one. We needed it the other way around.

JH: Well that was very early then, that would have been probably before the troubles broke out in August of '69. Would you think? Can you recall?

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BO'R: No, no that was..., the dates I can't tell you now, but it certainly was while they were still breaking out. All it meant to do was we would be all told work with the North to promote tourism to promote industry and that we would do it. It's not going to, both of us are going to work and that we would have created friendship before we needed political decisions.

JH: Could I take you on to the end of the 1960s to 1969 and the act that was passed at that time was the Industrial Development Act. That gave an enormous amount of power to the IDA, it became an autonomous state sponsored body and it gave it the power to set up a regional network of offices or a network of regional offices around the country for the promotion of industrial development. It was very clear at that point that there was a collision coming with Shannon. Have you any recollections of that period I'm talking from 1969, 70 71? that time and that almost conflict you would say with the IDA.

BO'R: Well, the IDA of course has a difficult, very difficult job to do and it has always, as far as I know, been pretty interested in Shannon and of the whole question of the air age and its effect on our future. I think that they are going to increasingly see the importance of Shannon becoming an air-age industrial centre and one specifically dealing with high-precision manufacturing

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and that it will give as much support as the development company requires, if the development company is required by government to keep promoting the idea of air freight through Shannon, then I think the IDA will help it because it will see that it's the best way of developing the country as a whole. I don't think there is going to be a failure on the Shannon situation. I don't think it can fail because it has already made its mark on the world and that it will continue to expand, not at any great speed, but fast enough to keep it viable.

JH: Just looking at that time that particular time '69 and '70 somebody has said that Shannon Development was given... wasn't given full responsibility that it was...it ended up without the responsibility or with the responsibility but without the power the full power to exercise that responsibility

BO'R: Yes

JH: It was given a job to do but yet it wasn't given the full powers

BO'R: Yes, it was given a job to do at a particular time, the Minister for Industry and Commerce was worried then about Limerick was afraid that Shannon, the emphasis on Shannon would take away from what he felt were the black spots in Limerick that had to be dealt with. I think that there has been a change since then and it's evident that Shannon is going to need the backing that it is going to get now from one company

one whole company, working on it. I think that it can do that, without in any way taking from what has to be done in regard to Dublin and the rest of the country. But I think that the important thing is that it will continue to be an outstanding example of Irish Enterprise in the air age and that it will give a lead to many parts throughout the world in which it has connections already. It has connections without about 25 different world centres where airfreight is being used. It is important that, that is maintained and not lost.

JH: *At that time, it was clear there was a divergence of thinking between the IDA and Shannon Development there was a dichotomy, the centralised view versus the regional view of industrial development. Were there serious consequences as a result of that do you think? Were there... obvious one would there have been opportunities missed because of that division in perspective?*

BO'R: Well, I don't think there has been anything missed but there has been, things have been delayed perhaps that might have occurred. I think that we should be very proud of the achievements of Shannon and that it should be promoted as a national achievement, the fact that we have started fifteen years ahead of any other country in the world using duty free as a shopping centre and that it has spread all around the world and it has begun in Ireland. The fact that it is the only country in the world that has developed an industrial zone at

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an airport, which enables planes to lift goods from factory floors and ship them to any part of the world, is obviously a thing of the future and will continue. The fact that it has made it possible for many countries that have had no industrialisation to begin industrialisation at the airport, because the airport has the facilities for industrialization, is also of immense importance in regard to getting rid of hunger. I mean hunger and poverty worldwide should be a great worry for humanity. Shannon has shown that you can begin to industrialise by doing it at an airport which, is ready to handle mechanisation and that, I think that is of immense value the idea that countries in poverty overseas can concentrate on a factory and make it at an airport with all the telephones and all the other pluses that it can have at an airport and launch the beginning of their industrialisation so it's not something to be given up easily and won't be, of course, given up.

NOTES:

1. Speakers on disk:

BO'R: Brendan O'Regan

JH: John Heuston

CO'C: Cian O'Carroll

2. ***** indicates breaks between tracks on the disk

3. This manuscript may contain errors in transcribing from the disk and in the interpretation of the spoken word. For external quotation the text above should be checked against the original recording.

