

Dr. Brendan O'Regan Disk 7

BO'R: It was a Marshall Aid Plan; I was one of sixteen Europeans taken there for six weeks so that we would understand what the Marshall Plan was about. So, it was six weeks of reflection of what might happen in Shannon as far as I was concerned. It was an important period of creative thinking for me and I actually got so many ideas while I was there that I came back on the SS American rather than coming back by plane in order to write down and I made a separate report which is fairly important because I wrote into that report a number of things that came into being thereafter. I knew I was coming back to a management machine which was very effective and that knew how to get things done. It had already created the shop concept, but the full impact of the shop concept only came into play once we succeeded into getting Duty Free permission from the government which was greatly helped by that voyage back on the SS America because I saw there a small shop beginning to sell duty free stuff and I thought if they can sell it on a liner crossing the Atlantic because it's not in contact with any country then they can sell it in an airport which at that time was almost like a sea liner but it was landing down in Shannon and was going on. It was touching... very little disembarking.

So that helped to get into the operation. The Sales and Catering organization, as it was then called, as a machinery to see what other ideas existed. One of the first ones that came out after the duty-free idea was the basic idea of doing something to counteract the thousand redundancies we were told we might expect as soon as jets came. So the first thought was: "we will create work for those thousand if, as we are being told we are only going to have only one flight a day landing in Shannon". The idea became as an idea to do an industrial zone and then we asked ourselves how is the industrial zone going

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to help Shannon other than employing these thousands who were going to be redundant at airport work and of course we were getting advice from various quarters then that there was going to be a big increase in air freight across the Atlantic.

It made itself the world's first and foremost and the one that has given life...

JH: Just to ask you there about the Shannon Airport Authority, its main tasks at that time in your recollection, what would these have been? The main task what would it have been the duty free?

BO'R: The main task was to ensure the airport traffic continued. There was always a threat of over-fly as the jets developed. Therefore, it was very important the crews wanted to come there, the meals were good. Good steaks were very important to them and I think they had a part to play in that situation. The fact the shop was the only and the best one was also counteracting the impulse to over-fly just because just because it could be done. So, our main task was to ensure the traffic at the airport kept up so we were working on that with the MET, the radio and the control who were excellent services also. The airport management of the airport under Colonel Maher was also first class. So, there was a first-class operation going on which made it easy for the jet aircraft to continue to land there, but that was a landing dependent on passenger demand via Shannon., became a thing of importance, which could only be maintained by excellent services.

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JH: Could we just turn to the board of Shannon development at the time, Buist McKenzie was on the board at that time, Dennis Green there was a Noel Huggard?

BO'R: Yes those were the first three, Noel Huggard because he had been a hotelier with me, the Huggards and the O'Regans were some of the earliest prominent hoteliers and I asked for him on the board. Dennis Green had been acting as our advisor as regards to legal matters when we set up the company. I asked for him and he was an aviator anyway, he used to fly down he had a small plane used to fly down from Dublin to Shannon. Who did you say?

JH: Well there was Noel Huggard and Buist McKenzie of course.

JH: Buist McKenzie was a real find because what happened in that case was after I had taken advice from Todd Andrews in regards to what kind of advisors to get because I needed advisors, I could see the kind of job I had was much bigger than I had visualised in the beginning and that everybody was reporting to me. I knew that was wrong and I was sitting opposite the table with Todd Andrews at a Tourist Board meeting and I asked him how he got the knowledge that enabled him to mechanise getting turf out of the bogs. He said he had used consultants and he gave me the names of the three consultants and I wrote to all three and Buist Mcackenzie was done by ?. He was the man who wrote that letter. I decided that if he would head it up then he would advise me on the management I required to handle the sales and catering job I had been given. That was very effective and I got to know him very well and that's why I asked for him on the board he was an engineer and accountant. He got very involved in the whole operation; he brought one of

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the best people in London in regards to the shop setup, a man called Ladislav Rice . He used to come and stay with me on a house I had out on the lake at Mountshannon. We were constantly talking about the ideas that could be made work. So, he was very good, had a good input and got very involved. He began to live in Ireland, died in Ireland. As evidence of how much I felt he had inputted into what we were doing, when his funeral took place in the Cathedral in Ennis, I went on the altar and said that people should know him and be glad that he had adopted us. Many of the ideas that I had, had come from discussions with him in regards to Shannon's development and he is buried in the graveyard here.

JH: What nationality was he?

BO'R: He was a Scot and very brilliant. I think very brilliant, in that the report, which was written, which eventually brought into being the operation that I was heading was written by him in such a way that we got a decision made which was most unusual. Not a state company, because in fact at that time the civil servants felt they had enough of state companies and there was a certain competition between state companies and civil service arising. So, I got the appointment to do what I wanted to do without a state company, which was most unusual. Lemass said at the time: "I can't get another state company accepted but you can carry on the way you are talking anyway. We will see what works out". So eventually I was a state company without a board which meant that I was responsible to the Minister which really meant that I was responsible to the Civil Servants but not in a very bureaucratic way and I really think that something was learned then that could be used again. It should be possible to pick out an individual who has proven his value as a manager and have him given a job to do which is not necessarily backed by a board. That to a certain extent can get over the difficulty, which arises from

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time-to-time where it appears a state board is taking over from a state company, from the civil service, that the civil service can have a written agreement with a single individual who will work directly to the Minister with guidance from the civil service. In other words, it is possible to have an NGO (Non government organization) working within the government situation, working within the government which I think is going to have to happen anyway as a way of getting more ideas, more new ideas brought in and brought in quickly. Certainly, anything as quick moving as aviation.

JH: We are back to the old chestnut again of enterprise and civil servants, enterprise and state operations? Is that the old chestnut again revisited?

BO'R: Well it is to a certain extent and you can see that when there are individuals with creative minds like John Leydon, like Lemass, that the civil service can get things done, but very often things are slowed up and don't move because of the democratic system and it has to be changed.

JH: You were saying there that we have to find a new approach less bureaucratic?

BO'R: Yes, I think one of the things that we have learned from Shannon and the development out of Sales and Catering which was a simple agreement with an individual on to the state company is worth examining whether it would be possible to repeat it again with the state company being able to appoint a unit to get certain things done fast and efficiently and that what happened in regards to Sales and Catering and its success is worth studying

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to repeat it again. It might be in the new movements at Shannon that have to take place that same experiment can be tried again.

JH: Could I just mention another name on the board at the time was R.C. O'Connor.

BO'R: R.C. was a very strong member of the state department and a very efficient effective man and he was the principal officer dealing with us at our most difficult times. He was a very hard-working civil servant, I clashed with him a couple of times because of the independence that I felt I had to hang onto in regards to Sales and Catering. Eventually, everything seems to have worked out all right. R.C. was part of the team that Tim O'Driscoll ran so effectively this was the aviation team, which he continued to run until we took him away from the department and appointed him as Director General of Tourism. So, it was a strange kind of situation where he had appointed me or he had acted for the Minister in appointing me and I had appointed him later Director General. He was the first director general of tourism. R.C. O'Connor was the most prominent of the civil servants in regards to handling the power of the aviation division in regard to the civil service.

JH: In your own experience did you find your relations at that time with the civil service, did you find them frustrating? Did you hog tie you in anyway? Did they try to confine you in any way?

BO'R: There was a period that it became evident to me, that if I didn't stop the civil service having total charge in regard to what was to be paid for the buildings we were occupying because we were... Sales and Catering was renting the buildings which had been built, that if there wasn't a control on the charge then it might become very difficult to run the operation at a profit.

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If I once began to run the organisation at a profit or lacking in profit then it might become a difficult operation. I was at that time wanting to change, I wanted to get one part of the agreement added into that there would be a relationship by which the rental to be charged to sales and catering was kept regular that it couldn't become increased relative to the turnover. I had raised that situation and I had at the same time written to Hilton and a number of others overseas, as I was about to go to a trip to the U.S.A. to visit an uncle of mine. I felt I'd find out what it might be like to be working in American at the same time. I hadn't deliberately done that but that resulted in a letter coming to me from the Department from Lemass, I think, or from Leydon. Which meant that a Mr. Herlihy came down to ask me why I was not fully settled down? I said: "Well I'm afraid that in due course even though I'm not really going to take the percentage of profits that is written in to my agreement, I feel I won't be in charge of the situation and my agreement was changed then. I didn't want to take.... the rentals were left at the figures they were at but at the same time I agreed that I wouldn't take the profits that were being made. I would have been a multi-millionaire if I did.

JH: Just to clarify at the time, Dr. Regan are you saying to us there that you were tempted to go to America at that time? That you were unsettled?

BO'R: I was suddenly feeling that I would be a civil servant or very much interfered with. It was worth doing, although I hadn't plotted it or anything like that. Just seems to have worked out all right.

JH: Obviously that autonomy that you had had was extremely important because as you were saying there that could be a very important factor, still be a very important factor, that autonomy you wanted to achieve.

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BO'R: Yes, at the end when I was handing over, R.C. O'Connor who you asked about, was asked to come and see me and discuss with me, what way what kind of a final situation I wanted? I had my mind made up at that time, that I wanted to go out without any reputation of having made a killing off the operation. I said I want five thousand a year at real money as a...R.C. O'Connor who you asked me about said: "Well you would want more than that?; "No, that's what I want, just that much but at real money. In other words so it doesn't...". So that's what I got at the end of it all five thousand, which is worth around thirty thousand, but it's not an inordinate payment anyway for those years.

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.

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