

ULOHP

Interview: Mr. Frank Prendergast

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I: So Frank, thanks very much for talking to me. You were telling me about the ground swell of public opinion for a third-level institution in Limerick and for a university in Limerick really, in the 1960s, beginning with the foundation of the Project Committee, the Limerick University Project Committee in 1959.

F.P.: That's right, well as you said there, there was always a very, very strong sense of grievance amongst those people in Limerick and you have them at every level of society, they're the shakers and the movers and the people who do things. We felt that Limerick had been badly done by because of a city of its size - we were then the third city in the Republic, after Dublin and Cork, bigger than Galway and Waterford - we felt that we had no third level institution and we wanted a university, and those of us who were interested in these things remembered projects like, from scholars like Pádraig O'Cearnaigh who was afterwards the principal teacher above in St. Brigid's National School; he had documented a campaign for a university for Limerick carried out in the nineteenth century, William Smith O'Brien of the great O'Brien clan of the patriot rising of 1848, he would have been involved in that campaign and there were other campaigns going on all that time above in the old, what is now the Royal Institute; it was then the Limerick Athenaeum, belonging to the Limerick City VEC. So you had all that ground swell of opinion continuously there and it really started coming to the surface in the 1960s and the '50s really, when people said, enough of this, we're going to start becoming effective and mount some kind of a campaign to get something like that for Limerick.

The fact that Donogh O'Malley then came to surface as a very memorable, redoubtable Minister for Education, he was one of the great catalysts in the Irish education system, now when he introduced free secondary education, that has really transformed Irish society. And the fact that he was there, people were going to him from the city, from the Fianna Fáil party and from all the organisations, but certainly from his own political

organisation asking him to do something about a university for Limerick, and the project really took off at a meeting of the past pupils of the Limerick Christian Brother school in Sexton Street, there were people there like Michael Keyes, the former Minister for Local Government and for Posts and Telegraphs, his son Christy Keyes, God be good to them all now, he was afterwards Mayor of Limerick; they were all past pupils now of the Christian Brothers school; Sean Prendergast, my cousin, Tony Brommell who was a classmate of mine going to school, and they decided to launch this campaign. This has all been acknowledged in the film version of that history. Sean Prendergast I think, I'm almost dead certain of this, I saw, I had first sight of what he wrote in a submission when they made submission to the Higher Education Authority and for a University for Limerick.

Another great very powerful intellect on that body was a colleague of Sean Prendergast in the Department of Customs and Excise, a man called John Moloney from Thomondgate, super intellect, very clever man, and you'd great people like that, and the campaign gradually took on, there were public meetings, meetings in hotels inviting politicians to come and listen to what we had to say.

The Trade Union movement, that's my background from where I come and that, I was president of the Limerick Trades Council in the 1960s and our mentor and guide there was Seán Finnan of the Fitter's Union, a very wise, shrewd, reflective man who groomed all of us young fellows there and he was on the Projects Committee with me and what we did then when we had been addressed by Ed. Walsh, and he explained to us all of what this whole new concept was going to be like; he had come from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology so he was familiar with that aspect of education, many people here weren't, they were thinking in terms of the old traditional, conventional type university, but on reflection you can see the wisdom of those who argued for what might have been seen at the time as a technological university because they realised anyway this was the way the world was going at that time, they were moving away from the classical European system of education and going into this whole new thing, a modern concept of technology. As well as that, there was a political dimension to it as well in this way; that

if we pursued, you know blindly, the path if you like, for the conventional university we would have come more than likely to a blank wall, because the other universities would have stymied us on that, not from any anti-Limerick thing but to preserve their own understandable interest.

So that was the situation there and the campaign gathered apace and eventually it was announced that we were to get our own National Institute for Higher Education and there was great division at the time, there was a lot of unhappiness from the more traditional thinking people that we didn't, we weren't getting a university, but an NIHE instead, but in any case, that went ahead, and in 1975, now there had been a Planning Committee ... Jim Lyons was on it, Margaret Lyddy was on it as well, a very shrewd woman, Anne Sadleir who afterwards became secretary to Ed. Walsh in the University, Anne was there as well and I think Philip Hilliard, I'm not sure about that but they were there and eventually the Governing Body, the first Governing Body, was announced from 1975, I think, to 1981, was the duration of that. I had the good fortune, I was then the regional secretary for the Shannon Airport, for the Transport Union for Limerick and Clare, I was based in Shannon airport, and I was asked or invited to go on the Governing Body. And I thought it was a great honour because I had always been interested in education, and especially further education.

There was no possibility at that time, it's unbelievable now the changes that have taken place, but people, I met the finest intellects in the trade union movement, obviously bright people but who didn't have jobs, the system didn't permit it at that time and you went into your trade, and you followed your trade, and they would have made wonderful civil servants and teachers and other professions afterwards but anyway we went along that course for the NIHE. The project was announced and it took place then, and included in the membership of the Governing Body was Paul Quigley, whom I had the good fortune I think, to propose or second, as the Chairman of the body. Ed. Walsh of course, was the ruling figure, the man that I regard as the greatest person to come to Limerick in eight hundred years, the vision, I mean the actual physical impact that he made on the life of the city - he was wonderful. And Paul Quigley, as I said, was the chairman. Then a

man for whom I had great admiration, James O’Keeffe; I think he was the general secretary of the ICMSA, the farmers union, he was a man of profound wisdom, I was always very much impressed by him; Frances Condell, who President Kennedy described as making the finest speech that he had heard during his tour of Europe, and there was another group of academics. Bishop Newman, who himself was a great academic and a great intellect as well. There were people like that and it was a wonderful forum in which to learn and to be able to make a contribution and it gradually evolved.

Then of course there were fierce opponents of this would-be takeover by the universities. The universities still didn’t want us to have our own independence, they wanted us to come under them, and one of my abiding memories was ... the ... one of the first graduation ceremonies, it was held in what was then known as the Thomond College for Physical Sports and Education, it was held there, and to the best of my mind and recall, a man, Dr. St. John Atkins, I think was the president of UCC, and when he came and we were all dutifully lined up, ceremoniously in robes, the usual thing, the very first boy or man, young man, to come up to be awarded his degree, he took the parchment from Dr. St. John Atkins hands and tore it in pieces in front of him and there was a gasp from the audience and of course a lot of the students would have approved of this, because there had been a great campaign that Limerick should remain independent.

I: Frank, can you remember why some of the students at that first graduation were angry with Dr. St. John Atkins’ presentation of the awards?

F.P.: I do, I do, because young students everywhere are always, thank God, you know, they’re militant and they’re looking for what they believe to be the right thing to do. They were absolutely opposed to any seeming connection between the NIHE and any university, they were fierce on this, and my strongest and most abiding memory of my time on the Governing Body was one night when all this campaign by the students were going on and they besieged us inside. We had a meeting of the Governing Body in the East Room of Plassey House, and we were besieged and locked in and they banged the door, the place was swarming with students, and I was of course used to this as a Trade

Union official, this was nothing new to me; I was well able to cope with that. But people like Paul Quigley and Frances Condell, her face was ashen white, she was very frightened at the way things were turning out and Paul Quigley and Ed. and we came out into the hall and I said 'Come on, we'll take them on and we'll come over and we'll speak to them'. Ed. Walsh always speaks very, very warmly of this particular contribution of mine, if I can say so objectively for the record. We went over anyway and the hall was full, I'm not sure where the hall was now, it was a big hall and Paul Quigley spoke first as the Chairman of the Governing Body, Ed. said a few words there and then I spoke. I stood up to speak and the kind of line that I took was 'I'm delighted to be here amongst you, I wish that your education ... that in your education logic and good manners had played a bigger part than they apparently have'. I said 'there is no difference whatsoever between what you want and what we want, the difference is how we attain it, where the end and the means would come into conflict there'. And I said 'we share your opinions' I said 'I'm a member, have been a member of the Projects Committee and we tramped, we burned the midnight oil speaking to people and we never had a chance of a third level education, I wish I did have the opportunity that you did' and I said 'we're fighting for you so that you and our own children will have an opportunity to have this third level education institute in Limerick and that eventually the benefits will flow from that into the whole community' and it's like the old Chinese proverb, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

So there was silence in the hall and I can name the man then that came to me afterwards, a man called John Reddington whom I knew and I liked him, I knew his father, I had great time for his father, he was a great public man in the city, they lived in Monaleen, but a day or two later or was it later that night ?, Reddington came up to me, John Reddington and he said 'you bastard' he said to me and I said 'why are you calling me that?' I said, 'because you split us down the middle' he said. So it was an inverted compliment, but I was delighted because I was used as a Trade Union official to speaking to big groups, the other members of the Governing Body wouldn't have been, but eventually the situation evolved and went on from better, to better to best, you know. So they were the early days and they're my abiding memories of that whole scene, it was a

wonderful, wonderful time to be alive when we were starting off there.

I: So it was the status of the institution that the students were concerned for? (F.P. it was, it was) it wasn't, they weren't protesting at ...?

F.P.: There were two things. They wanted first of all, they accepted I suppose that on a limited basis that the status was what it was, to lead on to greater things, but they certainly wanted independence for a Limerick Institute, they did not want to become embroiled in the university which the university would want and would love to have done, you know, oh that was very much a part of the small 'p', politics of the situation then.

I: They didn't want any controlling (F.P. No, that's right because) factor in any way from UCC ?.

F.P.: That's right, absolutely they didn't.

I: And of course there weren't that many students in the beginning, I think the first enrolment of students was only 100 students (F.P.: that's right, that's right) so it must have been you know, quite a small you know intimate (F.P. that's right) ... you know, environment really, the (F.P. it was) NIHE.

F.P.: And Paddy, God - in charge of the history development - Paddy Doran, I remember him saying at the time that it was a great thing for the staff there as well, the lecturers; they knew all the students and he said it was like some of the universities in Germany where Paddy had studied and lovely, a great scholar, a great historian, he used to write for the London Times and that - but he said that the university then was like some of the smaller universities on the continent, where everybody knew each other and there was a lovely interaction, a human interaction between them, it was a great time. But naturally then, and completely organically, there was an evolution from that and more degrees and more programmes being brought in and we used to reflect with pride when we'd get a

report from the Governing Body of what new programmes and courses were being offered outside it. So I can tell you then, I can tell you honestly that a very good friend of mine who was a very senior official in another university, a Limerick man, said to me, he's still alive, I was speaking to him last night, last night I was speaking to him. He was looking for an address of another professor and he said to me 'Frank the other universities are green with envy of Limerick University' that's what the situation outside, because Ed. if he was nothing else, and he was a whole lot of things, Ed. was a master at public relations; he was always to the forefront, taking radical positions, and on the days of graduations he'd make these statements, that we'd all be keeping our heads down and looking at one another, he became so radical. I remember looking at some of the Governing Body and some of the senior officials who mightn't approve of what Ed. was saying but Ed. was like that, he really kept pushing the boat out the whole time and you could feel it and I hope I'm being objective, and I've no reason not to be objective, you could feel the resentment we saw was there from the other universities, it was palpable, some of the things that were coming back to us ... maybe we were young and that, a lot of us were young at the time, but we took then such inordinate legitimate pride out of the thrust of the university and the way it was going forward. We were delighted absolutely, and undoubtedly I think it is true to say this it has been the single biggest event for good, and for the good of Limerick, not alone the city but for the whole Midwest region and for Ireland vicariously in the whole history of Limerick, and Ed. Walsh was the catalyst for all that. I often felt that UCC must have been cutting their corporate throat that they didn't keep him there or manage to hold on to him there you know.

I: What do you remember? ... you mention some of the radical propositions he had, what sticks out in your mind as some of the greatest contributions he made ?.

F.P.: The radical side of it would have been coming to us from the students' representatives there, they felt all the time they were resentful of this kind of 'Grise Eminence' if you like of the university, the Damocles sword hanging over our head and pushing the government the whole time to make sure that we would be given our own independent line to follow. And we didn't disagree with that at all fundamentally, we

agreed with that, but they were very shrewd people, I remember one man I can think of now and I'm not speaking of him as a Bishop but as an academic, he was the former president of Maynooth College, Jeremiah Newman, a profound intellect and a sociologist, and very wise in the ways of education politics in dealing with the government and that, and he guided us quite a bit there as well, but there were other great minds there, Jim Lyons, who was a lawyer and a member of the original body, again a graduate of Limerick CBS, people like that. I mentioned James O'Keeffe, I was tremendously impressed by him, Frances Condell, and Ed., they were great people and lovely people to know, it was a great experience, it was.

I: It was described Frank in the Limerick Leader, I think when the NIHE was set up as 'this institution will be unique'. Did you share that view that it was going to be a very unique institution?.

F.P.: I did, I did. We knew then. I've always been interested in education, I went on afterwards myself to do an M.A. degree with Keel University. I was always interested in that, especially in the trade union movement and we had been setting up education courses for our members in the Limerick Council of Trade Unions, that would have been a common activity through from Trades Councils like throughout Ireland, since the Trades Councils came into being in 1825. During the Anti Combine Acts from 1799 to 1824, you could get the jail and some of my people did if you met three people and were talking about combines or trades unions, but in 1825 the Trades Councils came in, they were based on the utilitarian philosophy there that came out from the French Revolution, and they were always interested in education and pushing this all the time. So that we were delighted from the Trades Council point of view, I was very much of that opinion and I felt that it would give Limerick an opportunity to open up this whole new road, as it then was, of education, as it then was in Ireland. Of course, it would have been quite well established in other countries we were late into that scene but very much a convert to that.

I: What contribution I suppose, finally, did you see the NIHE making in ways that maybe

the other universities didn't make?.

F.P.: Well it was very, very good to hear, I was speaking to somebody else recently who was involved in the university who had been out in America and of seven people that he met I think somewhere down in Texas, they were at some function there, four of them had been graduates of Limerick University, and he was inflated with legitimate pride and the way they have the Alumni of the University, have gone on, and one of the great things that they pioneered here was the, this, - I forget the term now, my own son and daughter, all of them did it outside there - where you went and worked with a company in your discipline (I: the co-operative education) the co-operative system, that was it. That came, that was tremendous, I saw the direct influence of that; where there was a double benefit if you like, where the students coming in were able to add to the sum of knowledge of the people in the factories, we had some great people there; I'm thinking of Dermot Whelan now God be good to him in HowMedica, he was conferred with a Doctorate afterwards for the contribution that they made.

But Dr. Hank Crabbe, the founder of Analog Devices, at that time we were anxious to woo some of the bigger industries in the region, the multi-nationals in the region, some of them conferred chairs on the university, but Dr. Hank Crabbe who was the founder of Analog Devices here, still flourishing as a company, told me at lunch one day that we were producing, the engineers that were being produced in Ireland were amongst the very best in the world and that was, I didn't realise that, I realised we'd made contributions to literature and the humanities and that, but he was an American, German background, German origin, but he made that and Limerick had, that was the perceived contribution of the people that were coming out, the graduates from Limerick, that they were doing wonderful things. So that was the great contribution and a source of enormous pride to the thinking people in Limerick. I suppose in every city you have the people that don't concern themselves with current affairs and political and religious affairs, but to those of us who loved Limerick and Ireland and were concerned about public affairs this was a source of enormous pride to us, and continues to be I must say, and the way we take all this wonderful thing for granted now, young people don't ever realise the great effort and

the toughness of the campaigns that had to be fought so that we could get what was there now.

I: And as a politician, you know, you've had a long career in politics at national and local level as well, did you see that the NIHE which went on to become the university, was of benefit in bringing industry to the region?.

F.P.: Oh I did, because amongst other things Shannon Development now would be 'Parri Passil' with the University, they work very closely together, the interlock between Paul Quigley and Ed. Walsh. Paul of course, as I said, was chairman of the Governing Body, bought all the land along the river, up as far as Annacotty and I think today objectively, I believe that it has to be one of the most beautiful university campuses in the whole world anywhere, but they established then the Technological Park and my own son is involved in the running of that now; he worked for Shannon Development, but they were a huge interlocking support for the university and I have no doubt whatever, but the way they worked there in inducing foreign companies to come in here and locate in this region, I did my own M.A. thesis on the attitudes of multi-national companies to the trade union movement, but the biggest body of investment by multi-national companies outside of Dublin is in the Mid-west region, and that had to be because of the evolution if you like of that type of a University which we had, and also of course Shannon Airport comes into that story there as well, but as a politician, we were, I was very much aware of that and I was a member of the government from 1982 to 1987, I didn't have a ministerial position, I declined that, an offer of the Ministry of State in Public Works, for other reasons; but again I was hugely aware of the importance of the region politically as well there, and very proud of it.

I: And you mentioned at the beginning that there was some disappointment initially when in 1968 it was announced that it would be a National Institute of Higher Education as a third level institution and not a university. Did the people of Limerick, was that disappointment among the people of Limerick, did that change then as time progressed?

F.P.: Oh it did, it did. Wisdom prevailed as I hope it invariably does, and we were guided, those of us, all of us involved were guided by those people who were interested or involved in either business or education who assured us this was the way to go long-term. At the start, it might have seemed that we had been short changed, that we didn't get the full university but it was a question of political and educational 'Realpolitik'. That was the situation and it prevailed, and people accepted that, and it grew from strength to strength, and again it's a source of enormous pride to all the people of Limerick, we take great, vicarious pride out of the achievements of the university.

I: Okay, thanks very much Frank.

F.P.: One source of great satisfaction and gratification to me was the fact that my first cousin, Maeve Prendergast, a cousin, a sister I beg your pardon, of Seán Prendergast about whom I spoke earlier, he'd been one of the leaders in this whole campaign; she was married to Dr. Tim Mahony of Toyota who became a very good benefactor, I think he gave something like a half a million pounds or euro to the university, so it was just one of these items that give you pleasure and a source of quiet pride that your family had been involved in that kind of a contribution to the university. I was there the night that that thing actually happened, when Ed. Walsh welcomed Tim and Tim gave the money and that and of course it has gone from strength to strength, there was some other great benefactors as well. It's unbelievable when I go there now. I grew up as a young fellow where the university is now. I spent all my youth in the scouts, swimming, fishing, bird nesting, camping all along there, I knew every field and ditch in that place and to see what it has evolved into now, one of the great young universities in Europe, with its old and ancient tradition of scholarship going way back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, delighted.