EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

August 15, 2005
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Interviewer

University of Virginia
Stephen Knott

EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

FINAL EDITED TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

August 15, 2005

Galbraith: Where did you come from today?

Knott: We came from Hyannis today.

Galbraith: Ted Kennedy there?

Knott: Yes, and he very much wanted us to do this interview with you. We're ready to go, so you can start speaking.

Galbraith: OK, you begin.

Knott: If you could just tell us if you have any early memories of meeting Ted Kennedy, as opposed to Jack or Bobby, that would be terrific.

Galbraith: Well, I met him many times over the years. I have no particular memory of any first meeting. I had a certain association with the Kennedy family, and I first met him when it was a family occasion, and he was one of the family. My memory was of the family rather than of Ted himself, and that, to some extent, has been true of his life.

It was a very important factor in Ted Kennedy's career that he followed four people. He followed a father who was very active in politics, and there was nothing restrained about him, as an ambassador, as a figure in Massachusetts. And then, of course, his two brothers. He was, in Massachusetts history, the fourth in line. Only gradually over the years did he have his recognition of his full role, which was that of being the premier Senator of his time.

He had two things which were central to his contribution. One of them was his very close association with Massachusetts problems; he served as the Massachusetts voice on issues in Washington that had a Boston or Massachusetts effect. The other was the fact that public attention over the years was, of course, overwhelmingly on JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy], but also on Bobby, on Robert Kennedy, so that only in the latter years did the very large role that Ted played emerge in full light of day. I think I can fairly say that I was one of the first to see that, and one of the first to see Ted Kennedy as the voice on issues. My association with him was largely, but not completely, on economic questions.

Let me go back to a point. The fact that he followed a President—and followed a very visible Cabinet member and Senator—colored his career, which is true to this day. People do not realize

what a force for liberalism he was in the Senate and how scrupulous he was on things that might affect Massachusetts. Everyone who knew that family went to the President, of course, went to the Attorney General, and Senator, of course, and went to their father. It was a distinctive feature of Ted Kennedy, and this I emphasize, that he emerged from a political competition for distinction that was beyond that of any other member of the Senate in modern times. But emerge he did.

Those of us who were reasonably close to the issues of the time came to understand how extremely important his role was. It affected anything with a Massachusetts overtone, but it also had a strong effect on anything that was important with a decent liberal reputation of the party. He had an instinct for both. One was compelled by being Senator; the other was compelled by a wide-ranging intelligence that made him one of the most prominent liberal Democrats of his time. I take a further step there and say being a liberal Democrat means that you're being a Democrat.

Knott: Was your association with him primarily on economic issues?

Galbraith: I think that's first. We talked economics together over the years, often when he was in Massachusetts for a weekend or something. He would come by the house here and we would get into the economic issues of the time. But I also had various conversations with him on specific political issues where I was somewhat informed and he was fully informed.

Knott: Do you remember some examples of those?

Galbraith: I'd have to give some thought to that. There were enough of them that I would be selecting from a large range. Most of the issues on the Hill, in the larger range of political matters, were things that were somewhat adverse to a liberal Democratic state like Massachusetts. He had a close eye for what might be damaging in Massachusetts.

But that was not the main part of my association with him. The main part of my association was talking about economics. He would come in here for a wonderful talk on the economic problems of the time—Are we moving into a depression? What can we do about it? How is this particularly affecting the state here in Massachusetts?—the things that, as an economist, I was supposed to know. One of my debts to Edward Kennedy was that, over the years, he forced me into issues that I might have sidetracked.

Knott: Do you recall any of those things he forced you into?

Galbraith: They were all of the same order: employment; unemployment in outlying parts of Massachusetts, extending from the Cape to the mountains; and the particular effect of some legislation. I had nothing overwhelmingly in mind that might have an adverse effect on the state. Those were the two that, when we met, we were quite likely to discuss.

Knott: I see.

Galbraith: On the way home from Washington to Boston, he would stop by here for the kind of talk we're having today.

Knott: Did you find him to be a quick study, somebody who grasped the things you were telling him quickly?

Galbraith: I wouldn't say so. I would say that Ted Kennedy, as much or more than any member of the Senate that I have known, had an alert view, a sense of the importance of issues, particularly if they had a local effect.

Knott: Let me ask you a speculative question. Do you think he would have made a great President?

Galbraith: Oh sure, no question about that. Being the fourth in the Kennedy hierarchy was definitely a handicap. There was his father, his two brothers, and then in age came Ted. But Ted was, in my view and in the common view, a top-notch Senator, and he would have been a top-notch President. I hold the somewhat outdated view that to be a good President you need to (1) be intelligent, and (2) have a basic understanding of the social and economic structure of the country—and he had both. That, in my case, began when he was still a student at Harvard.

Knott: You knew him then?

Galbraith: I knew him then, yes. I knew all three—the oldest brother, who was shockingly killed during the war and was a really talented figure; and the two brothers who also inhabited my rooms at Winthrop House when they were undergraduates.

Knott: Would you feel comfortable making comparisons among the brothers, the things you noticed, since you knew them all fairly well?

Galbraith: I wouldn't have any embarrassment on that. They were all equally bright. It's possible that the oldest brother who was killed had a range of effort and knowledge that was greater than the other two as undergraduates. That was my impression. But I regarded them as ideal students, all three of them.

The oldest brother came in to see me one day and said, "You know, I've discovered a way to make money." I said, "That doesn't surprise me a bit," as one of the Kennedy family. "But," he said, "this is easy and more important. I go over to the business school and take bets on [Alf] Landon. There's a feeling over there that Alf Landon might win, and they're very willing to put up money behind it." And he did. He asked me if I wanted to share. Being Scotch and Canadian, I didn't.

He came back to tell me that he earned enough money to buy a new car, and would we like to go with him out to Wellesley for a date. We did. On the way out, he expressed his anger at his brother, JFK, who he said had just bought himself a new car on the installment plan. He said, "This isn't fair. I had to work for this automobile, and he gets his by borrowing money." It was a distinction that was not large in my mind.

Knott: You knew the father, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr., as well?

Galbraith: Yes, I can say I knew him quite well. The week before the election—you can't print this—there was a big meeting of people who were involved in the campaign, as was I. I was sent

out to any place that had to have a Democrat, but not an important one. We all met in a hotel down in the Wall Street area of New York. The question was Keynesian economics, which was a vital force that we needed to accept, although we didn't need to publicize it. To the surprise of everyone that late afternoon, the Ambassador, when it came his turn to speak, gave his solid support for Keynesian economics. When it was over—I said you couldn't print this—I walked out with JFK, and he said, "How in hell did you get hold of my old man's ass?"

Knott: That's a great story, but we won't print it, I assure you [permission later given]. Do you have any idea why Senator Edward Kennedy seems to love the Senate, but his brothers Jack and Bobby, the story is, really didn't like the senatorial life?

Galbraith: I have no idea whatever. The overwhelming fact in JFK's mind was not the Senate but a step on to the White House. He did not regard his arrival in the Senate as a culmination of his ambitions. That was secondary to the White House, very much.

Knott: Do you think of Ted Kennedy as *the* champion of liberalism in modern American politics? Is that an appropriate title for him, other than yourself?

Galbraith: I don't regard myself quite in that league. I would say that Edward Kennedy has been the most reliable voice for liberalism in the Senate. I say that not with any sense of originality, but because that is also believed by a large number of informed people. He was not a man confined to the big issues. He had an eye for anything that was important. That was always something that surprised me. He would come up with something of urgency in Massachusetts, which I would say to myself, "Galbraith, you should have thought of that yourself."

Knott: We're hoping that this transcript will be read by people fifty, a hundred years from now, who are interested in this era and interested in Senator Kennedy.

Galbraith: I certainly was hoping for it. The enthusiasm for my major writing of fifty years ago is already under full control, full restraint.

Knott: We want to thank you so much for giving us your time for this very important project.

Galbraith: This is really something very important. The other thing that you should have mentioned is the shrewd knowledge of what was important politically—both nationally for liberal national politics, but also for his own constituency—much beyond Massachusetts, but the liberal working class. This was his basic foundation. From that he went on to a natural desire for information on a wide range of other subjects.

I make one point. When I got a call from Kennedy from his office, I never knew what I was going to be asked, but I always knew it was something I should know.

Knott: He always made a point of surrounding himself with very good people, including yourself, in this wide circle that he had.

Galbraith: Well, I was never that close to him. I was always his figure here in Cambridge. When he came to Cambridge, he came down the street and we had a chat.

Knott: Just one final question and we'll let you go. I just wanted to know if there's anything else you want to put on the record for someone who might be reading this a hundred years from now.

Galbraith: Oh, yes, there's no doubt about that. One of the things that was very important about Ted Kennedy as a public figure was that he was slender, well turned out, well spoken, somebody who visually was always pleasant to be with. To the extent that he was aware of that, I don't know, but all the rest of us were.

Knott: That's great. Thank you so much again for your time. We're very grateful.

Galbraith: Don't thank me for the time; I enjoyed it very much.

Knott: It was an honor meeting you.