

Interviewer: Austin Francis, I'm going to talk to you about politics. When and how did you decide to become a political minded?

Austin Francis: I was political minded since I was 10 years old. Now, I was, I used to follow the political thing with like, the electricity came in 53, we got to radio an electric radio, about 54. And then when the elections would be on or anything like that, I'd, all would be gone to sleep, but I couldn't go to sleep. And I'd have to listen to all the people that was elected and how you know how all the votes fell and all that type of thing. But in 55, I told my dad and like I was the black sheep of the family because his politics was quite the opposite. And I told him, I remember telling him well that I would one day, win a seat for FG in the council

Interviewer: My goodness

Austin Francis: And I did it and put them back-to-back. Sorry, I didn't put the third one but that is that.

Interviewer: Why did you choose FG,

Austin Francis: Why I chose FG was, when I started going to school, you know, everybody had their own, but I was reading the history, I thought it was shocking what was done to Michael Collins. Michael Collins was sent over to London, de Valera didn't go send him over to London, they signed the deal in London and when he came back, then he got "Batta agus Bothar", they fell out then and you know, why didn't he go over and do it. And de Valera was in jail ok in London, and I think it was Collins that got him out. I think I heard them saying that they sent a key into him through a cake of bread or something they got it in jail, you know, that was like what turned me I could never ever

Interviewer: Couldn't let go.

Austin Francis: No

Interviewer: That's fair enough

Austin Francis: And that was and then when the opportunity, I always felt then that I was going to do that. And I remember when I came from England, I was politically minded in England. I tell you the party I followed in England, and if I had stayed in and probably, I'd have ran for a council for Labour in England. Now, I did organize a march one time in England, and it was against a Labour woman Barbara Castle, she took two pence an hour off our wages. And like that I did I felt strongly about it, and I organised a rally anyways, down the London Road out to Manchester City, and I was only 22 at the time. You know, holding these flags and with it all, it figured out at nothing, but Barbara took two pence an hour off us.

Interviewer: And did you get the two pence back?

Austin Francis: No, they didn't we didn't get the two pence. But that was because you see England was in such a state at that time. Now, the other thing that I did do, I give an hour of free labour in England for six months. And I thought of that and said it to people here for

Ireland was in the doldrums. You know, was to try and get the country up and running again, and an hour's worth of free labour. I was working in the city York traveling from Huddersfield to York was 50 miles a day, and the point about it was we used to have to leave we'll say Huddersfield at six o'clock in the morning, and you get York City at seven o'clock and you see the job wouldn't start then you'll be hanging around there, so what I used to do then I'd get the mixer going and I used to get so many wheelbarrows of compo for the bricklayers because I was labouring on five Brickies, which was tough work. And I'd have all that compo and it already then and that was going ahead of us for the day. But I give my hour to the Queen. And I came home then, and I got involved in the FG club, I got to be chairperson of it. And I thought well, why not I was on the road a bit because I was chairman of the parents' council, I was chairman of the first Hill Farmers Association for the IFA and I was the chair of that and I was going to Dublin and meeting people and stuff like that. So that was politics too like, you know, so that's why I got into politics

Interviewer: You got your foot in the door.

Austin Francis: Yeah, it was I see pictures of myself there after the first campaign and you know, it was tough work too like you're hitting the country and asking for the vote. Like you have to have a thick neck too

Interviewer: You do

Austin Francis: You know it's not the easiest, like what it was, it was exciting but the point about it is I think politics has to be inside in the blood or something like that. Because you know

Interviewer: You have to have a thick skin. You have to want to love it to do it.

Austin Francis: Yeah. And like you're, there's no point in going into it if you're not committed and have passion.

Interviewer: Yeah. And you could see a want for a counsellor out here

Austin Francis: Yeah definitely, definitely now in all fairness, Martin J. O'Toole had been a counsellor for 44 years, he had been a senator and he had been a TD. And young Peter Sweeney probably if he, he got into his seat like, and I put my name on at convention in 99 when Peter was going, and what happened that time was, we went into the convention, but you'll see the rules was that you had to have so many people paid up members. And I know, when we say we'd have our convention, it was supposed to be held in December. And then Michael Ring got sick or something. And it was put back out to springtime, but when everybody there was 15 paid up members of the party. But when everyone heard that I was gone, and they were rushing to me, with whatever it was 10 shillings or 15 shillings but the point about it was they were too late they weren't allowed it wasn't going to go through. So, I went to Westport, and I contested the election, I made my speech and everything like that. And I got my 15 Number one votes. And I was out the door then because the other lads had one fella had 40 now you know whether they were right or wrong he had 40 paid members. You know, he was from Newport. And Johnny O'Malley had so many as well. So, it was only

Ring, and whoever had the most paid up, members they were allowed to contest the election. And that was in 99. And then the job that was handed to me was take the Newport fella out this area to canvas every door. And I done that there was no sour grapes because I walked out of the hotel that night and said five years won't be long going and I'll be back again. And I did take your man from Newport out of this area, and I canvas. And you know, I was getting embarrassed because every door we knocked on they would say that I thought it was you we'd be voting for and he had no, he was a schoolteacher now, but he hadn't just the charisma, he had no answers for them. Because it was all farming and stuff that way you know

Interviewer: He didn't know his audience

Austin Francis: He didn't and what I used to say to the man was vote for such s one was a vote for me. That's the only way I could put it across. But he lost he lost the seat anyway; you see what happened was Michael Ring got two quotas and was only elected himself. And like left the area, Newport had no, they happen to representative and Louisburgh had an FF representative then, but Peters Sweeney had no opposition at all. And naturally enough, everybody had to vote for him. But that's what happened in the 99 and then when it came to the 2004, I had made sure that there was so many paid up members you had to have your homework done and because the Secretary that was in it before that, well you couldn't trust the same person because she could go through FF in the morning. You know if she didn't get her way

Interviewer: Wow

Austin Francis: That sort of way but

Interviewer: Politics

Austin Francis: It is its a dirty game it's a blood sport

Interviewer: It is a blood sport, you got in the next round

Austin Francis: I got in the next round and myself and Peter Sweeney contested and Peter had five years don't like he should have had his groundwork done but he hadn't he just hadn't and when the first count came through I was on 965 And he was a 960 and then they started to, you know it's a dirty game they started to say some of my votes was gone missing and this type of thing and I know on the night they had to put all the votes anyway back into a big box in the middle of the floor that was like a coffin there was no question about it and of course in my sharp tongue anyway I looked around they had it all done sealed and tape and everything and I said like that where's the Undertaker where's the Undertaker? and we were all told to go home and to be resumed the count in the following evening again at five o'clock. But there was funny enough there was five votes that was the night before you see and they couldn't, they couldn't say yea or nay or they couldn't give it to anybody. And at five o'clock on the even anyway they opened up the thing again and count went on and the next thing my five votes had disappeared I was down it was level playing and I know my daughter Olivia, she gave me the phone call and she says whatever you had last night you have nothing tonight.

But I went back in again and in all fairness. She was brilliant. And for the first time ever at a tally or anything like that. But she was good at it. They started to count again and the next thing anyway, there was a vote of mine within Margaret Adams box. There was another one that got into Johnny O'Malley's box, and they were round about anyway, and there was we were going in, I got four back anyway and I went in for tea and one of the head fellas came in and said we got another one got and that you're back five again. So, no matter how they do on that night then, and fair play to Martin J O'Toole, he could see it because he was at it all his life. And he told Peter, he says, you have to go up and conceit to him, the point about it was it was one o'clock then that was on Monday morning, that count was going on all Sunday people were getting fed up,

Interviewer: Jaded

Austin Francis: Jaded.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Austin Francis: And yet, one of the Hughes' they were big into politics. I know, they had a brother a TD, and he wanted another recount. And myself and Harry, was great friends, that because I was in the archaeologist thing with him and all. And I just got annoyed. And I told him that, I says, I'm an old man here tonight and I was jaded after a long canvas, I said, if you do that, I've won fair and square, but if you do that as a you're a businessman, but that will be talked about, the Hughes' in Westport, if they do that and he withdrew his allegations

Interviewer: Enough is enough

Austin Francis: Yeah

Interviewer: You managed to get those five votes scattered to the four corners.

Austin Francis: Yes. You see,

Interviewer: Yeah, it's a dirty business as you said

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And so, you were elected then

Austin Francis: Elected for that term, then 2004. I was happy enough then it was a big step from selling eggs.

Interviewer: Yeah, you stopped by then you had finished your shop anyway so

Austin Francis: I had yeah, and I started in the political line, and I was lucky enough to become funny enough during my election, then. It's a funny old game. My election then got the power of Mayo council. Because you see, you have, we had 17 elected and they were, you see there was 31, 31 councillors, and whoever had the majority that got the power of the council to run the show. So, me winning the seat because like a seat never had been worn for FG west of Westport until I done it like in all the years that was there. And we got the power of the council then so there were 31 votes then like it was 17 FG then and rest has arrest, so

all the now whether it is right or wrong, but I suppose it's the same thing. All the jobs then all the chairs you see are given to whoever has the majority in the council.

Interviewer: Oh Ok

Austin Francis: Like you have, first of all, a chairman has to be elected. And how they done that was, whoever was we'll say, the Last Man that was in the council we'll say he got the first option of the chair, and then they had to put us all into hats, then

Interviewer: For the other jobs

Austin Francis: For the other jobs and who got the chairs down the years.

Interviewer: Yeah

Austin Francis: See you had 2004 5,6,7,8. and 9, and that's how that happened.

Interviewer: And did you get the chair?

Austin Francis: I got the chair. The next time I was made vice chair in 2007. And then, when I won my seats in 2009, it was my chair for 2011 2011-12. And that was like, that's, that's a big job to be first citizen of Mayo. You know, you have to go all over the world then and represent your country. The first gig I had, as well. I had one or two gigs, then how that works is the chairman if he isn't fit to, we say attend a function, the Vice Chair has to step into his shoes and take his role. So, I had I think, was one that I had to do then for the chairman. And then when it came to my end of it you know like I had to leave here one day, and I don't think, they hadn't been able to get, everybody was going out of the country somewhere. And the LE Eithne ship was docking in Dublin. And the chairman, the county manager was abroad they were all in some position somewhere. And this Neil Sheridan, he'd be into that type of thing you know, representing the county and the county manager says ring Austin Francis. He says he's probably the only man to do the job to represent. I hadn't had the chain, but they had to get the chain and put it on, on the LE Eithne and so you're man rang me he's from Claremorris and he's says can you meet me at six o'clock tomorrow morning in Claremorris, and we'll head for Dublin and on the LE Eithne then you had to welcome the people and blah blah blah.

Interviewer: Wow

Austin Francis: So that was one function as vice chair. And then when you had to, I had to go we say when I become chair well my first gig was to the town of Tartu. Yeah. And that was a musical. European musical festival that was taking place there. That's in Estonia.

Interviewer: Yeah, Estonia.

Austin Francis: Yeah. The town of Tartu. A lovely town. Now Surely to God.

Interviewer: Wow and why a counsellor from county Mayo? Why Mayo?

Austin Francis: Yeah. Well, you see, there was a group of youngsters in the musical end of it that was going on there. And I was sent along with them to represent. I had to bring a couple of Foxford rugs then and present them to the hierarchy that's in Tartu.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Austin Francis: I never seen more when I went in there, you know, there was television cameras all closing in around you and presenting Foxford rugs to these people sure they didn't know where Foxford was, but this is politics you know.

Interviewer: Yeah, and did you enjoy that?

Austin Francis: Oh, sure naturally you had to enjoy it.

Interviewer: And were you on your own? Are we allowed to bring Celia?

Austin Francis: You see the county manager was along with you and a group of people from to county as well. And you had to you had to go there and do that we had in all fairness, it was a few great days it was in the month of July going into the last few days but the weather was scorching, but you had different functions like it was a big festival there was on you know, on the street, and they had a band stand there and all bands from all over Europe was playing there, and we danced in the rain jives and waltz's and what have you in the town of Tartu, and we went to mass we had to walk I'll never forget it, we had to walk miles to go to Mass on a Sunday, this Sunday that we were in it. And the mass was said in Russian but fair play the priest was at the door and of course, we were Irish that way, and he welcome us and then he went up and it was only a small church sure I thought he'd never finish, he must have been an hour and a half preaching. He was no three minutes job. But fair play to him he had the book, you know how they do? We'll say he was in Russia now. But they had the books there that translated for us. And you could follow it. And he went up to Communion then he said the body of Christ that you understood it. And all that was very well done very well. But them places they are awful poor; they had only got independence a few years before that. What you see the fine bridge houses and villages that was shelled to bits with the war and all the people's names that were up there a little bit like what's going on in Ukraine today.

Interviewer: Yeah

Austin Francis: That was the first gig I had to represent the county with and then I had to go to Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Washington, and I had to go, there was the Jackie Clark collections. The memorabilia of that. There was Sinead McCool she is the I don't know what word she would be.

Interviewer: Curator

Austin Francis: Yes, Me and her had to go to Chicago and Washington to launch that.

Interviewer: Wow.

Austin Francis: Yeah. And you had to meet all these people and make your speech? Speech. I think I wrote a speech here before I left. I got into the world vault, where they hold all the maps in Washington, that is an interesting place I had to put on a white coat and gloves. I got in there and I was showed all the maps of the world that there since they started mapping the world.

Interviewer: Wow

Austin Francis: And I know the first map that was laid down of Ireland like you could see your man was there he's American, but his grandfather or his great grandfather was a Donegal man. That was the chap that was in charge of it, and one of the ladies that was there said I'm 30 years here, she says to me, and I never got in and you have come and got in. You know you weren't allowed in. That's a very interesting place now.

Interviewer: Oh, I bet.

Austin Francis: I know you could see like the map of Ireland. Now, there was nothing that was way, way back. I seen Roonagh was the first thing that was on the thing, and he said you know Roonagh is? I says I live; I live beside it and Carrownisky, funny enough Doughmakeon doesn't seem to be there but Carrownisky was there, but I'd say because there was a school there or something like that anyway. And he says, "do you know where that is?" and I said, I went to school there in my feet.

Interviewer: So, politics got you about

Austin Francis: Oh, yeah. Well, these are jobs like for the same thing they had Mayo.ie. When they opened it that was organized. I had to launch that in New York and Boston and Philadelphia for them. They were some trips.

Interviewer: Yeah, some trips

Austin Francis: Yeah, for a little buckin from Doughmakeon. Last trip I had the night before I hand over the chain was in Lithuania. We were twinning Ballinrobe town with a town in Lithuania. And funny enough we come down and went in and on the airplane anyways and we were told that we couldn't fly that night because there was some something wrong, they wouldn't tell us where to be taken out and where told we will be flying at 12 o'clock, because it was the brakes that had failed on the plane. And they had to wait for a fella to come from Ireland to fix the brakes. So sure, they were all frightening because the chain had to be handed over at the council meeting you see.

Interviewer: Wow

Austin Francis: So, we got into Dublin and down, but we made it and I handed over the chain When we were in Washington I was at John Kennedy's grave at a quarter to one on a Thursday and I was raising the green flag at a school in Killeen at one o'clock on Friday, the following day, that was some travelling.

Interviewer: There's nothing glamorous about that, though. Austin Francis, you know what I mean you're sort of that's your destination, you have to be there to be there.

Austin Francis: Oh yeah,

Interviewer: It's no jolly as they say

Austin Francis: No, no its all go, and you have to have your P's and Q's about you because you have to go and speak. You don't know when you're called on like, there is a peace park in Philadelphia, which is a lovely, lovely place. All the countries I think, do have a little garden taken. And you have, you take, for instance, the famine now, and the people that went out and have, you know, they have statues of them around there and stuff like that. And I remember, it was just after when Enda Kenny getting in to be made Taoiseach. And he was over because I worked with him on a few occasions. But Enda says to me this morning anyway he says what have you on for the day? he says this would kill a horse you know, because like he was fresh into it and all the people was just hang out of him. Enda was, funny enough, nobody like him in this country and saying he wasn't a great Taoiseach. He was loved he was a statement on the other side of the word.

Interviewer: What was it that made him so eloquent abroad?

Austin Francis: He was marvellous to go to the podium and he could bring the crowd.

Interviewer: Really

Austin Francis: Oh, yes, it was, it was amazing. But like again, he was an Islaneady man you know. And like, you see the politics again, you know, the knife was in the back because he was a west of Ireland man too,

Interviewer: West of the Shannon,

Austin Francis: West of the Shannon too, but like abroad, he was a statesman, and he could bring it across

Interviewer: But I suppose in America he was very relatable to the west of Ireland

Austin Francis: They are of course, emigration, Now, I remember going into the peace park and I said to Peter Hines, I said like do I have to speak here? And no, no, you haven't to do. Nothing was written or anything, you know, because somebody would always, we have to have something, you know, and this fella went off and he made a great speech anyways, and the next thing, and I now call on you know they have the PR fellow and I now call on the chairman of Mayo County council to, well look at it!

Interviewer: The ground could have eaten you up

Austin Francis: And I had to walk over to the mic. And the first thing that I don't nearly anywhere. And I was told it was wonderful to speak in Irish. And I used to always say when I go "Failte romhat go leir" for the Irish wherever you were and stuff like that. And I rhymed

that half any ways. And I started to speak I had picked up on some of the lingo that the last one had spoken. And I enlarged on it let's say and stuff like that. And I made a famous speech, oh sure they were all over round me then ah the bit of Irish was great. That was these are little things.

Interviewer: But that was in you from a young age Austin Francis you were a public speaker.

Austin Francis: I have never got any, I talked enough when in the shop.

Interviewer: When you're a shopkeeper, yeah, that's got you out there speaking. Now politics, politics it's about selling

Austin Francis: Oh well of courses it is. So that was that was, and we said the parades in New York and Mayo men's Association. You have to go there. And then there is Cleveland, where you have the Achill people and they have a big celebration in October, and that's celebrated by the mayor. You had to go and address that crowd the night before we'll say St. Patrick's Day, we'd fly into New York, and they'd be a big dinner then and for all the for everybody. You'd have maybe five or 600 people at that dinner. So, you have to go up then and you have to give your speech and address them five, five or six hundred people which was no mean feat

Interviewer: Did you know this before you got into it, Austin Francis? Did you know that this was what was going to happen?

Austin Francis: No, I didn't. I hadn't been versed in any of that like, but, you'll learn it as you went on

Interviewer: Off the cuff as they say.

Austin Francis: And then as I was saying at the start, there was one time, where it must be a chairman that went up, but he started speeching. And like, you know, in America, dinner is at seven o'clock, it's not in Louisburgh that it would be 8, the bells start ringing, and you're all ushered in there and dinner starts, and then there's a speech with the soup gone on and everything like that. But this fella went up, and he started speaking, and they had to go up and take the mic off him. And then you'll see when I was told it was my time then in the next year to do that, and then you have to go on, on radio, there's a fella there that does an interview on radio with you the day before that happens. And he says to me, and I had heard the craic going on about this fella on the mic being taken off and he says to me, he says, I hope now you won't be, oh I says to him sure two hours will doing me. Oh, he thought this was great. But I just go up and I had the little speech and my few words that I wanted to do I had it done in three minutes, I got the mighty clap. Everybody liked was what it's all about like.

Interviewer: Did you find that work as a counsellor was sort of taken away the from people here on the ground? Like you're talking there over the last few minutes there of all the places you have to go, you had to go. We had to go.

Austin Francis: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was wrong with keeping a counsellor doing the work in his area?

Austin Francis: Yeah. Well, the point about it was the blessing of the mobile phone.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Austin Francis: And anybody that wanted me, my mobile phone was on 24 hours. And I had that there and everything. When I got a phone call, I could get back to Mayo County Council and say, this is what I've been asked to do, I kept that end of it even when I was in hospital, I had my mobile phone beside me on the thing. And I was once in hospital and people was ringing me and I just ring the council or ring whoever and everything was done.

Interviewer: People don't see this Austin Francis, a normal person looking in, they'll just see Ah they're going away for St. Patricks Day, ah, they've gone here they've gone there. They haven't done, there's a hole here, there's a light out here no one knows that you are at the end of the phone.

Austin Francis: Yeah. And like that's why the mobile phone was a gift. Because you could like you're never miss anything. And now in all fairness, like, that's where some counsellors let themselves down. "I'm out of the country". And you know, the story. That was that. No, I remember getting a phone call I was just landed in New York, and I got a phone call from a man that was very irate about because the planning permission for his house was you know, he couldn't get planning permission. And I was sitting into my dinner at a table in New York. And I listen to him and everything. And from that conversation, I explained to him what he would do because I had researched it before I had gone, and that man got his planning permission you know.

Interviewer: You have to know what you are doing.

Austin Francis: Of course, you have

Interviewer: And you need to know the ins and outs of the politics within the politics.

Austin Francis: Yeah. And you have to respect people that elects you. You have to respect people that inside the disk that you have to go in and ask you have to be honest; I've always said that you have to be fair but firm.

Interviewer: Yes.

Austin Francis: You know, there's people that will go in there and say, well, I you know, the words I've done this and done that what have you come away thinking that they've had a good job done. Well, if somebody comes in and hits you with that they are not entitled to be listed to. That's how, that's how I run my show.

Interviewer: And what do you think went in awry and the next round?

Austin Francis: Well, what went awry on the next round was the man who was put in the area that didn't get because like usually it's one or two I got 1000 or more first preference in the third time I attempted but the other man only got a couple of hundred. And like we say when you take for instance in 2009, when 2004 the way the political scene was, I got 965 that man got 960 when his vote was distributed then it was a one, two, there was 400 votes of his coming back to me, which brought me over the line at 1300. And then the next one brought me too. I was getting off on 1800 votes. But you see what happened here on this area was 250 was no good. And then you when you see when you didn't make the quota like or evenly some people will get elected without making the quota if you're the last because they have to give it to the seat at the nearest to the quota.

Interviewer: Yes.

Austin Francis: But then that's how it happens. And the Westport people they elected four in Westport. And the other side of the coin, was they give their number one to a man below in what do I call it Mulranny or down that area, you know, thinking now what I was listening to in 2014, because I had more even deliver to the Louisburgh area in from nine to 14. Because first of all, people don't realize when you get elected will say, which I think is wrong. You get elected in the month of June, the allocation for money is always made in December. So, your sitting there from June until about the following February, you have to wait for the allocation of your money in December, and you're there like

Interviewer: You're doing nothing

Austin Francis: You're doing nothing like what should be if it was right when you're elected, there should be an allocation of money there.

Interviewer: Immediately.

Austin Francis: Immediately, but you're waiting to hear for six months.

Interviewer: Why does that happen?

Austin Francis: Well, that's because that's the way you see the budget the budget is read always in December. You see that's the way it is.

Interviewer: Doesn't make sense.

Austin Francis: Does that make sense? But what doesn't make sense.

Interviewer: Yeah true

Austin Francis: But you're, you're only really, you're only four and a half years, we'll say the first time, you know, then the next time, you'll see you have your budget already secured and you can you can know where you're going to put your money. But the 2014 election after I delivered the bridge there in Louisburgh which was huge. And I delivered playgrounds around about and stuff like that. But people were saying like sure you're as popular as you don't need my vote.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Austin Francis: You know, and they give it they give the vote to the Mulranny man, and he never delivered anything in Louisburgh afterwards

Interviewer: You see this is the thing you wouldn't. You know, politics is a sort of selfish game as well. You deliver for your audience and so he would deliver for his audience.

Austin Francis: Yeah, but he didn't deliver. Like then you see the other thing is which people don't realize there was eight seats four Westport and four in Balmullet electrical area. And then with the wisdom of the fellas that wrote up the constituency, they took seven seats, and were the only constituent in the area and that last seat. So, there was seven seats then in the area, and three was for Westport and four was for Balmullet the population they go on. So, there was three seats to be won then which was very hard to but, like, if that man didn't get his vote, like, I lost that seat then by 62 votes. And he took 29 in Killeen, and 38 from the vote in Louisburgh and it lift no counsellor in Louisburgh, like that's a big mistake. And I don't care about who's in politics, whether its FF, but an area needs representation if you're as our Lord says if you're not at the table, you cannot have supper

Interviewer: It's a young person's game now isn't it

Austin Francis: It is

Interviewer: No disrespect to yourself. But people want, young people you'll know

Austin Francis: Yeah of course. And then the point about it is you have this laptop job, and you have technology you have to be you have to be you know ofay with all that like you have to be known in all fairness I have learned how to email and do all that sort of stuff and answer phones and be on the ball, but it is a young person's job

Interviewer: And will you continue to be a, FG member

Austin Francis: I will, I will I'm paid-up member, but it wasn't an FG FF, It a FF man or anybody come up to me and asked me to do something for them. If that could possibly be done it was done, that's the type of guy I am, I never went into politics to be

Interviewer: You were more independent.

Austin Francis: Yeah, I wanted everybody to have you know, the loaf not the crust you know that type if way. Because I remember when I was out canvasing first, I remember, I asked a chap, and he started laughing at me. I knew that he was what we call Black FF and everything like that. And he was more or less skitting and asked me, you know, I was, where was he going anywhere, and everything like that. I said that's fair enough and bid him Gooday and everything like that and he was the first man when I got elected, that came back to me that was in trouble where he had houses built and the flood was gone in the front door. And the first job I done was to put gullies in to take the water away. So that's the type of guy, that's, that's politics, and it's, it's sad to think that the people just didn't see that end of it and keep whether it was me or Maxwell or whoever but keep a man in the flesh.

Interviewer: Yeah, and that's the hard bit it's very blinkered politics. And I think the young people got very jaded with it.

Austin Francis: They would.

Interviewer: I think that's what you need, you need a new fresh blood come in. And how would you think that a new person a younger person would get on with the older members there in the counsel?

Austin Francis: I have a funny feeling that, you know, that the young, educated person can bring that across the line. Because if they don't, they shouldn't be there. But they will, a young, educated person will bring that over the line, because they'll have the charisma, and they have the know how to get around that one

Interviewer: Would they get the respect

Austin Francis: They will eventually they'll have to be

Interviewer: It will take a while

Austin Francis: Yes, and there's a bad apple in every battle, you know that way, but someone once said, that God Almighty wouldn't change anything, you know, but, you know, a young, educated person will be fit to bring that with them. And if they don't, they shouldn't be there. Because it is, it's something that you have to be a people's person too.

Interviewer: Daunting.

Austin Francis: Yeah.

Interviewer: And I do think a female counsellor would work.

Austin Francis: Oh, yes, yes. Because we are in the era that like, you know, yourself, gender balance, it's, it's every day, and the only sad bit about it that, why there isn't more women going into politics, I know, that women has a different line with say, if they're a married person, if they have a family, you know its "ni feidir leat freastal ar dha shraith" you cannot attend two strands, they say like, but if you have if you have that passion, you will, you will be fit to bring the whole as I just say, you'll bring both sides with you

Interviewer: I can see, the passion is still there Austin Francis.

Austin Francis: Oh, yeah. Well, I love the political end of it. I love helping people. I have to say, I am the councillor, I'm getting phone calls every day too. And I can ring anybody in the council. And I can ask them the question, and they'll try and get something done for you. And of course, then I'm involved with the PPN. And I'm involved, I'm still involved with LCDC like, I'm doing the SPCs meetings and everything like that. So, the only thing that the PPN I said it at our last meeting, we should be we are representing you know, the politically area, but nobody's coming with anything I said it, there's nobody coming like, you know, when someone is saying we want this done, or we want that. I was saying I'm going to go out there,

like the Killeen Community Council or the Louisburgh Development Company, which I'm still Chair of, but you know, the men's sheds, they came they're sitting on the on the SPC, on the social inclusion end of it, you know, and like I say, no one is coming with anything. I think there's only one person that has rang me over the last couple of years that was from the nearby North Mayo, how do I get such a thing done with water schemes and stuff like that. You know, the other thing that I will say there is a Wellbeing statement. Now, this is something that the PPN is into as well and a lot of people think that it's about your health. Well, it isn't. It's about, you know, getting stuff done in the area. But it was there during because we had all the Zoom meetings.

Interviewer: Yes, yeah.

Austin Francis: And we sat on them I'd go upstairs, and I get on them and listen to them and ask questions. But there's a lady comes up from Cork, and they were to have a Zoom meeting below in Balmullet. But the people from with say, Westport to Balmullet and I did through up and I said, I don't think it's fair I said, why have we from Louisburgh all the way to go down to Balmullet. How's that we can't have something in Westport? I said, do you realize the area? I says where I come from you have Clare Island, Inish Turk you have Aughagower out to Leanna . And of course, the lady didn't realize it. But at our last meeting and she says I rectified that. She says I told the lady in Cork you'll have to have it on in Westport you know, you imagine now asking me well its a long way down would ask you as a representative to go down to Balmullet. Do you know?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Austin Francis: And sit there and mightn't be listened to. These are things that they should now they should be more council meetings, we had one and Louisburgh there, brought them out and we had, you know, you had to have a program ready for them and everything. But what I feel that council meetings should be brought out to the local areas a lot more than having them all in one place. Like

Interviewer: Do you get much done in a council meeting, you read up reports in the Mayo News that this such and such and you're just thinking hang on a minute that's, they said that three months ago?

Austin Francis: Yeah. You see, that's where if you aren't good at going in. Council meetings is all a big, long agenda like I chaired them for 12 months. There's agenda for this agenda for that. In my view, it's a talking shop.

Interviewer: A snooze fest.

Austin Francis: Yeah, it's a talking shop. And this somebody jump up and it's your three minutes to talk, but they jump up and, you might take six minutes. But what a councillor should be good at is going into the relevant offices and saying I want this done in my area. And you know, and the other thing is about we'll say when you get a new budget, like there's Notice of Motion money that time 38,000 There was special allocation, maybe 30,000, there was LIS funding could be 80,000 or could be 150,000. And the first year that I was in it, there

was social and economic Fund, which each counsellor got I'd say there was a 200,000. And what that came from, were the tip at Derrinnumera earned so much money from taking stuff from Sligo and they had to, they had to give out to each councillor then so much of that money, you will take for instance, now, 90,000 of that went into doing the street in Louisburgh that time now and in all fairness, I've said it at every meeting, I sit down to the county manager I brought him over to Louisburgh sat him down at a table along with Director of services and pointed out work that had to be done. And right before we left that table, there was 90,000 ring fenced to improve, you remember when they took the camera up the street and all that type of thing was done. Concrete footpaths, there's a few of them that still to be done but that was spent there. The other thing then that was ring fenced that time, there was 35,000 I got it ring fenced to put the playground down in Bunowen. Myself and Martin Keating had some job to put that playground there. We sat and he was he had no family at all a married man with no family at all. We started with seven or eight mothers I brought them together and sat them down. They all wanted a playground, but they didn't want there you know, that's what you're up against like to it.

Interviewer: Yeah

Austin Francis: It wasn't suitable there, everybody wanted a playground, but not in that place.

Interviewer: Yeah

Austin Francis: And you see, they didn't realize that place was when the building was done that piece of ground was left there, like as a green area. Why leave it there grown rushes that was my argument.

Interviewer: Exactly

Austin Francis: And I thought it was pretty central enough to the town itself, you know.

Interviewer: As it turns out, it's perfect.

Austin Francis: Yeah. And what I heard the last day now, you see, there's has to be an inspection on the playground every so often. And there's something missing and maybe a gate or something and nobody can use that now because it's not past. And like it's their waiting and with the craic that went on with the Greenway and all the auditing that is done you see Mayo County council, are a bit thrown back you know with that.

Interviewer: Yeah,

Austin Francis: That's how that playground got to be there. You know, and then the playground in Killeen. That time when they wanted to get a going like I sat down with seven or eight mothers, and I said we'll get a ticket going 20 euros, the 20 euro 20 pound I can't remember and we'll sell it because there was a need for 25,000 first and the place had to be bought for 40,000 at the time, and we got to 25,000 from the ticket collection that time. And I

got 25,000, I twisted Peter Heinz's arm and got 25,000 out of the council and I got 75,000 because I sat on the Leader board

Interviewer: This is the thing people don't see that Austin Francis, they see you as a counsellor they don't see that you're the chairman of every board there is in the area, and that's what dirties politics people don't see the positives. They see the negatives

Austin Francis: Yeah, and then you see the other side of the coin, well sure that fella he's on a good salary and all that sort of craic you know, but like that's how that's playground came there in the Killeen area. Same way with the two car parks done behind. I had to bring people in and argue my point for both of them car parks to put in place there, and they did cost a ball of money, but the council like, you have to talk to the right people, and you know, get things up and running. That's why a counsellor is badly needed. There is pitfalls and sure it was a learning curve for me but the only thing that, as I say, like I didn't go into council because I was I was there on sitting on committees and I chaired like you take for instance, I went out to Brussels there I wasn't a councillor at all and I chair four meetings there with four guys and argued my case and stuff like data,

Interviewer: You can't go into a something without educating yourself. You need to know what you're talking about

Austin Francis: Of course, naturally enough now, the only thing that I didn't, like I only got six years in the National School I have no secondary schooling.

Interviewer: You've got a lifetime of experience Austin Francis.

Austin Francis: If I had I probably be dangerous to give me anything

Interviewer: But it's lovely to see that you still have the passion.

Austin Francis: Ah yeah

Interviewer: The passion is still there.

Austin Francis: I'd run in the morning if I was able

Interviewer: No regrets

Austin Francis: Ah I have no regrets and as I said to a fella the last year, like I won two elections and I lost two elections and I'm not bitter and it never dawned on me and I can go over and look at my picture hanging on the wall with my chain on me and like it doesn't you'd have no business being bitter about things because you're going to those things either to jump the fence or that somebody is going to do better. That's the way it has to be. Because if you have to live with resentment and bitter your well off anywhere, you know. No, no. And like you should be there able to help people to the best it's a gift for anybody that loves it and a passion for it, it's a great life and you know

Interviewer: It's a credit to you Austin Francis from the day I've met you you've been no end of help for everything.

Austin Francis: Ah yeah, I'm that type of guy you know as I say even beyond an England everybody anywhere, I went ah you have to do this you have to lock up you have to be head and tail of everything. I was just looking at a build on there the last time because it was Woolworths that we were after building and like I don't five nights I had the full you know the master key of that building for five nights in my pocket. I looked after it and it was only, I was only 22 years old.

Interviewer: Wow

Austin Francis: Yeah. Bough my own lodging house, I was a landlord at 22 I bought the house I was only 22 when I took over

Interviewer: So, no wonder you came back and started being a shopkeeper, a politician

Austin Francis: And that was very interesting because like I was the youngest of the gang that was in the house and the landlord just, just imagine I was gone to bed and he walks into the room to me and he says will you buy the house off me he wanted to get home to Ireland with his wife and kid and at that time in 1967 this month 67. And there was no money with anybody no house been sold or anything and he was stuck there with a mortgage on it. And he was stuck with it there and he say to me will you buy the house off me lock stock and barrel and I asked him how much did he want for it and he asked me 1500 for it and before he left the room I bought it for 1200. So I went to bed, the lodger and got up the landlord

Interviewer: Fair play

Austin Francis: So that was interested then to run that.

Interviewer: Absolutely, you see its all an education. It's a grounding for where you are today.

Austin Francis: You had to take over a mortgage then. Ah money you can imagine buying a house for 1200 pounds.

Interviewer: It was huge.

Austin Francis: Yeah, we were on four and six pence. Would you remember that?

Interviewer: No, that was before my time.

Austin Francis: Four and six pence per hour. We worked for in the buildings that time you worked a full nine-and-a-half-hour day from eight o'clock until six in the evening was the start and you got two pounds, two pounds now. And you give 30 shillings of that for just to sleep at the house you bought all your all your grub, but that was the first week's wage I got suer it was heaven. You can imagine you be around here you could get nothing in those years like there was no I remember cycling into town when the vocational school was to be built in

Louisburgh and there was McCormick's from Castlebar, I was probably about 18 cycled into town waited all day within the contractor didn't turn up, and I came home again. Had no and then we say you might get a pound here and a pound there and stuff like that. 13 pounds, three shillings and three pence that was my wage in England,

Interviewer: You were made

Austin Francis: Oh, you were, like I said you give 30 shillings to the land lady, but you're fed yourself then and everything like that. And you had to go dance then one or two nights a week. It was 10 shillings to get into a dance in England at the time. Well, we my brother and his cousin, they ran coaches from Halifax, to Huddersfield, into Leeds, and when they give that up, I took that job over and I did that job on a Saturday and a Sunday night. And I used to do the door and the Shamrock in Leeds. Then I used to do with the cloakrooms all the men's and women's cloakrooms, but you got into the dance for nothing for doing all that. Yeah, but it was very educational like you had 45 people on the coach and you collected their money and stuff like that kept Law and Order.

Interviewer: Fair play to you Austin Francis

Austin Francis: But them were the days!