Speech by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar to Dáil Éireann on the death of An iar-Thaoiseach, Liam Cosgrave

I was deeply saddened to learn of the death of An iar-Thaoiseach, and former member of this House, Liam Cosgrave. As Taoiseach and as leader of Fine Gael I extend my deepest sympathy to his family and friends.

Liam Cosgrave was someone who devoted his life to public service. Today a grateful country thanks and honours him for always putting our nation first.

Mar Thaoiseach agus mar Ceannaire Fhine Gael, ba mhaith liom mo chomhbhrón a dhéamamh lena chlann agus lena chairde.

Bhí Liam Cosgrave tugtha don tseirbhís poiblí le linn a shaol, agus tá an tír fior-bhuíoch as an sár-seirbhís sin, ag gabháil buíochais leis agus ag tabhairt onóra dó as an saothar a rinne sé in ar thug sé tús áite do leas an náisiúin i gconai.

Le linn a shaol, rinne sé a dhícheall institiúidí daonlathacha an Stáit a chosaint, agus a chaomhnú, le misneach agus le diograis.

Bhí a shaol ar fad tugtha do sheirbhís an Stáit, agus spreag sé an oiread sin daoine lena dhíongbhálteacht ciúinn, a mhisneach agus a rúndaingne.

Throughout his life Liam Cosgrave worked to protect and defend the democratic institutions of the State, and showed great courage and determination in doing so.

He always believed in peaceful co-operation as the only way of achieving unity among the people on this island, and in the 1970s he celebrated that this country had embarked, in his own words, 'on a new career of progress and development in the context of Europe'.

Born in 1920, in the middle of the War of Independence, Liam provided a powerful link back to the foundation of the State. His father, WT Cosgrave, helped create many of our institutions, and defended them when they were in jeopardy. His son shared the same values and approach to public life.

He joined the army during the Second World War when volunteers were needed, reaching the rank of lieutenant, and he brought the same spirit of civic responsibility to his political career.
An internationally respected statesman, Liam Cosgrave was in the government that declared Ireland a Republic, and as Minister for External Affairs he brought Ireland into the United Nations, thus taking our place among the nations of the world.

As Taoiseach he was invited to address the Joint Houses of Congress in the United States in 1976, a notable honour, and one which enabled him to make some powerful points about how a democratic state should derive its power from the consent of the governed.

Consistently opposed to violence, Liam Cosgrave was a courageous voice against terrorism, and protected the State in times of crisis. He looked terrorism in the eye and did not flinch.

In May 1970 he showed his courage and determination to get at the truth in this chamber, when as leader of the Opposition he pressed the Taoiseach about the plot to import arms illegally after receiving information from a trusted source.

A few days later Liam Cosgrave addressed this chamber and spoke of a situation that was 'without parallel in this country since the foundation of the State'.

His action and that of the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, has been credited with saving the security forces of the State from becoming embroiled in a crisis in Northern Ireland, and has been called by some a great public service, and by others his finest hour.

A man of conscience and principle, Cosgrave joined Fine Gael at the age of 17, was a TD for almost 40 years, and leader of the party for 12.

His term as Taoiseach between 1973 and 1977 will be remembered for Sunningdale, the qualities he brought in leading a successful coalition government, and his courageous defence of the State against threats internal and external.

Ministers from both parties praised the way he chaired Cabinet meetings. He believed in giving everyone their say before reaching a decision. It was a very effective way of doing business, and one of my forebears, John Bruton, has spoken of how he set an excellent example. Liam Cosgrave sometimes arranged for special Cabinet meetings to deal with specific
topics. In my brief tenure to date, I have followed his example.

It was said that Liam Cosgrave marked his Cabinet papers with the same attention to detail that he marked the racing page in the Irish Independent and, of course, racing was his great interest outside of politics.

Indeed it was noted that the racing page of the newspaper was the only media output to which he really paid attention. A wise man!

Sometimes, on the rare occasions he allowed Cabinet meetings to go on for too long, with a Minister rambling on, he would slip out the racing page and study the form.

Because he was leader in the days before the Dáil was televised the public did not get to see just how good he was in this chamber. Although a man of few words, who did not believe in making speeches in Cabinet, he chose his words carefully and he was able to make them count.

To quote from a senior figure in the Labour Party at that time, 'when you sat behind him on the benches listening you felt very secure, you felt somewhat proud, you were reassured'.

He was also able to eloquently express the mood and feeling of the country at times of crisis and tragedy. In May 1974, following the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, he spoke movingly of how the men of violence were contributing to 'a world where reason and compassion are dead and only might is right'.

It was his desire to find a peaceful settlement which inspired him to come to the Sunningdale Agreement, which became the template for the Good Friday Agreement, peace and power-sharing in the North.

As Taoiseach he hosted a very successful meeting of EEC heads of government in Dublin Castle, and welcomed the first visit of a British prime minister to Ireland since independence.

On moral and social issues his views reflected his deeply-held religious beliefs. However, even those who disagreed profoundly with him praised his approach, which was always respectful towards other points of view.
His decision to vote against his own government's Contraception Bill in 1974 has always drawn attention, and it surprised many at the time.

But, whatever about the rights or wrongs on the issue, he showed courage in allowing a free vote on what he believed was a matter of conscience, and he had the courage to follow his own conscience on the issue.

No matter how high the office he assumed he never forgot about serving his constituents and his community. He took an enormous interest in Dun Laoghaire and Rathdown and believed that a politician's political strength and legitimacy came from their democratic mandate.

In the Elysée Palace preparing to take over the European Presidency he kept in touch with events back home so that he could monitor the resolution of a strike at the Blackrock Post Office.

Predeceased by his beloved wife Vera, Liam was a man of great loyalty and kindness, a wonderful sense of humour, and strong personal dignity.

Our thoughts today are with his three children: Mary, Liam - who succeeded him to this House - and Ciarán.

Liam Cosgrave's entire life was in the service of the State. He inspired so many with his quiet, showless determination, courage and fortitude.

I had the honour, on occasion, to meet and be in his presence. I was always struck by his commanding presence and great humility, which in him were complementary characteristics. In my own career I have been inspired by his spirit of incredible public service and as Taoiseach I hope to live up to his great example.

Liam Cosgrave is perhaps best summed up by paraphrasing one of his most famous speeches: he was a man of integrity who, totally disregarding self-interest, always served the nation.

We have lost someone great from our land.

D'fhéadfadh Dia trócaire ar a anam. Ni bheidh a leithéid ann arís.