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## Moakley, Burke Interview Transcript (MS100/09.01#26)

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**Program Title:** "Representative Moakley with Representative James A. Burke"

**Program Participants:** Representative John Joseph Moakley, Representative James A. Burke

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**Recording Overview:** Representative Joe Moakley and Representative James A. Burke discuss the economic issues facing America's elderly and working class such as Social Security reform, housing, affordable healthcare, and the impact of the fuel crisis. The discussion was recorded as an episode of a radio show featuring Congressman Moakley and other members of Congress.

### TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

**JOE MOAKLEY:** It is with great pleasure that I introduce my guest for today's program, my good friend and colleague in Congress, Congressman James A. Burke. Congressman Burke has represented the Eleventh Congressional District of Massachusetts since 1959, and in that time he has gained considerable influence in Congress. Mr. Burke is the third ranking member of the House Committee on Ways and Means. He also serves on the Joint Committee for Internal Revenue Taxation and on the Joint Committee to review operation of the budget ceiling and to recommend procedures for improving congressional control over budgetary outlay and receipt totals.

Representative Burke's position on the Ways and Means Committee has enabled him to be in the forefront of the fight to guarantee senior citizens the comfort and dignity that are rightfully theirs. He has been very influential in the molding of the Social Security legislation that has come out of that committee in recent years and continues in that capacity stronger than ever. It's a pleasure, Congressman, to have you on my show today so that we can talk about one of your favorite subjects, and I know and mine, the vital issues that are facing the older Americans.



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**JAMES A. BURKE :** I'm happy to be here with you, Joe. You and I served at the State House together and now, you're down here in Congress. And you're on important committee assignments, particularly on the Banking Currency Committee where you deal with a lot of the problems on housing and other legislation, interest rates and other things. I know you've been leading the fight to cut those interest rates down and to produce more housing. You are to be commended for the work you're doing.

**MOAKLEY:** Jim, I'll tell you, as a freshman member, it's a very nice feeling to come down to Congress and see a Jim Burke and a Tip O'Neill<sup>1</sup>, fellows that I have had the opportunity to serve with on the local scene and to be able to work hand in hand with you going in the same directions. And I feel very happy. And every opportunity I have to say this that I am very happy that I am coming in behind a Tip O'Neill and a Jim Burke because you people have made the way that much easier for the freshman Democratic Congressman from Massachusetts.

**BURKE:** Of course, the fact that you and I are both natives of South Boston doesn't hurt at all.

**MOAKLEY:** Not a bit. Congressman Burke, we both know that our system for providing low cost housing for the elderly in this country is a national disgrace. And given the determination of the President to continue to block the further subsidies on low cost housing, do you think that this session of Congress will take any important action on this field?

**BURKE:** Yes. I believe that your committee under the leadership of Chairman, Wright Patman, and Congressman Bill Barrett and yourself have been doing a lot of work in this direction. Of course, you have got roadblocks were being thrown in the way by the Nixon Administration. One of the real problems in the export problem that we have where this Administration is encouraging export of a lot of raw materials that are so vitally needed in the building industry for

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill (1912-1994), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eleventh and, after redistricting, Eighth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987. He also served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1936 to 1952.



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the building of homes and apartments throughout the nation and they have created great shortages in this area. Plus the fact that they've also almost encouraged the raising of interest rates that make it almost impossible for the average person to buy a home. And again, they've been freezing and withholding funds as you know. They've done everything possible to slow down the housing stats in this country.

Until we get two-thirds of the membership of our party in the Congress, which I'm hoping will take place in 1974, I don't see much relief for the people, because, as you know, the President can veto a bill. It only takes a two-thirds vote to override it. And, then in addition to that when you have an Administration who is not sympathetic with the housing program in many ways they can slow it down, which they are doing.

**MOAKLEY:** I know that you and I talked about this before off the air, how disappointed we were in [Housing and Urban Development] Secretary Lynn's pronouncements. He was supposed to come in with something to encourage the housing stats and he came in with nothing. He said that he wanted direct subsidies to tenants. Well, this is fine in an area that has adequate housing. But you know that in our area, in our Commonwealth of Massachusetts, we have some 235,000 families living in substandard housings. It's very important that the housing stats get reactivated again, because we know that an eighteen-month moratorium on housing really means a three-year delay. Not only does it affect the people in substandard housing, but it affects the economy which you're right on top of in your Committee on Ways and Means.

**BURKE:** Well, as you know, Joe, I take a trip around my district four times a year and I invite all the constituents in. During the last recess I had over 1,100 people come in to see me. Of that 1,100, I'd say over fifty percent of them were concerned about getting an apartment or a place to live. And particularly in the area of the elderly, it's unconscionable that this government should allow this condition to exist with the elderly [not] having a decent place to live, a place where they can get proper heat. Many of them are living in real slum areas and really under real



suffering. Until we can get this view of the Administration changed around and have them show some concern for these people, I don't know what we can do.

**MOAKLEY:** Jim, since your district abuts my district, or my district abuts your district, however, we do represent, many times, the same type of constituency. And I agree that during my turns around the district I met people looking for adequate housing. And then we met the senior citizen who is either a widow or widower whose spouse had died and they're having trouble paying the real estate taxes to keep the property that they fought and worked hard all of their life to buy.

**BURKE:** Well, this is an area that we're trying to do something about. You and I have co-sponsored legislation to have the federal government come in and give some sort of a subsidy to the people over sixty-five who find themselves in this position; who helped pay the taxes. Because many of these people bought and paid for their homes over the last twenty-five or thirty years, and now when they're in the twilight of their life, these property taxes are rising to astronomical heights. It's just impossible for these people on low fixed incomes to even pay their taxes and also be able to buy the food and clothing that they need, the other necessities of life. So, the federal government should step in in this area and provide some assistance in the form of subsidies to people over 65 who are faced with these property taxes.

**MOAKLEY:** I agree. Congressman Burke, on January 1, the Supplemental Security Income Program took effect. It replaces the state-operated old age welfare programs. Do you believe that this program will be effective in meeting the needs of our senior citizens?

**BURKE:** Are you referring to the eleven percent increase?



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**MOAKLEY:** No. The SSI (Supplemental Security Income program)<sup>2</sup>?

**BURKE:** Oh, the SSI. Well, it will in some states. But unfortunately, in Massachusetts, as you realize, Martha Griffiths, the congresswoman from Michigan, put an amendment in there that prevented a pass through of an additional ten dollars a month to the blind and disabled and the elderly. It was a cruel amendment.

**MOAKLEY:** I want to commend you for your fight on the floor at the time.

**BURKE:** We fought it, but the coalition, some people below the Mason-Dixon Line and the Republican Party and some people didn't understand what she was doing, adopted the amendment. And this was a result of the hardship not only in Massachusetts, but also in Mrs. Griffiths' home state of Michigan. They took thirty-five million dollars away from the blind, the elderly and the disabled. It seems that if this government of ours is going to save money, they've got other areas that they can save it in rather than at the expense and most disadvantaged people.

**MOAKLEY:** Jim, we in Congress know that you've been a leader in legislation aimed at helping senior citizens. Last week, the President proposed a mammoth health program for all Americans. Do you believe that this program is better than the Kennedy Health Bill or are there some serious programs with the Administration's bill?

**BURKE:** Well, I'll say this. I don't want to condemn this program all the way. But it is a step in the right direction, although it barely skims the surface. But it is a little bit of evidence that they might be concerned about this area. We have to do something about catastrophic illness in this country that hits a family very hard because there are no provisions in the law. And only through the work of charitable groups are they able to take care of some of these people. We've got the

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<sup>2</sup> The Supplemental Security Income Program, created in 1974, provides payments to people with low income who are age 65, or are blind, or have a disability. The program is administered by the Social Security Administration and is funded through the U.S. Treasury.



Holy Ghost Hospital in Massachusetts and I think the Jewish group has got a philanthropic group—have got a hospital up there. We've got the Shattuck Hospital in Jamaica Plain. But thousands of beds are needed to care for these people that go through long illnesses, particularly terminal illnesses where they—and of course, some terminal cases can't get into Shattuck Hospital because of the rules they have there. And they've got some empty beds over there too. I could never understand this.

But we have to do something in this field of healthcare. There are other nations in the world that are far ahead of us. Canada, for instance, you can go up there as an American citizen and go up skiing and have your leg broken and go into the hospital. They will repair that fractured leg and put you right on your feet and send you out and you don't get a bill. They can even do that for non-citizens. And here we are in this country we can't even take care of our own citizens, the most affluent nation in the world. So, it seems that this is an area where we have to delve into quite deeply. I don't believe that the Administration bill goes far enough.

The Kennedy-Griffiths Bill<sup>3</sup> seems to be headed in the right direction. It's going to call for wholesale changes in the law, and a lot of changes being made in healthcare, insurance and everything else, and a scenario that should be studied and looked into, because other nations have this type of plan now and apparently, are working successfully at it.

**MOAKLEY:** I agree with you. I had the opportunity to talk over the weekend with some people from Canada, and they were amazed how far the United States was behind them as far as supplying adequate medical care to those who can't afford it. Of course, in this country, the very rich can always get proper medical care, but it's the fellow in the bottom of the totem pole and it's the fellow right in the middle that can never get the protection that his family needs.

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<sup>3</sup> The Kennedy-Griffiths Bill, introduced in 1970 by Senator Edward Kennedy and Representative Martha Griffiths, was the first proposal to create a single, universal health insurance program to cover all Americans. The bill did not pass.



**BURKE:** The difficulty is that the philosophy of some of the people who have been leaders in the field of healthcare, they seem to feel that there should be a penalty on working for a living. And the average fellow working for a living not only in the healthcare field, he takes out his insurance and everything. But I can think back a few years ago when I had a serious illness and remember my family, and the hospital bills ran up over 35,000 dollars for the year. Well, I paid twenty percent of it. I was fortunate to be able to pay twenty percent of it. But what bothered me when I just got out of the office in the hospital and paid the bill, and I was only paying twenty percent of the bill, I was saying to my self, Good God, what does the average person do who hasn't gotten access to these funds. He might have eighty percent coverage on the high option plans that they have, but what does he do to raise the twenty percent?

I just had a member of my family, and I won't name the hospital, but he was in the hospital for three days. It was a routine slight operation he had. The bill he received from it was 3,200 dollars. Well, now of course, he had to pay twenty percent of the 3,200 dollars. Twenty percent actually would have been a fair bill. 3,200 dollars, that's better than a thousand dollars a day. What family—suppose an average working man goes into the hospital for, say, six weeks and pays a bill that high. This is one area where we have to get into and we have to put our teeth in there and really bring about some solutions so that the average American citizen can expect proper and fair and equitable treatment as far as healthcare is concerned.

**MOAKLEY:** I agree with you, Congressman Burke, that it's not fair for a breadwinner who goes out, works hard everyday trying to put some money aside so he can buy a home. He's beset by a serious illness either to him or one of the members of his family, and overnight all of that savings can be wiped out completely.

**BURKE:** Wiped out. He will have to go down and get a second mortgage on his home. He goes down to the local finance companies and he borrows money and paying thirty-six percent interest on it. He has to sell his car. He has to mortgage his furniture. He has to do everything. And even then, with all of that, he is still faced with a tremendous bill afterwards.



**MOAKLEY:** Well, Congressman Burke, we've talked about some of the things that affect the senior citizens. And I think that of course now, we can get right down to something that is right here now. It's on the horizon, the fuel crisis. Of course, we know it affects everybody. But those who are on fixed incomes, such as our senior citizens, they have to lower their thermostats. They have to suffer like all of us. I know that the fuel crisis has created hardships for them. But I now that since you're working so close with some of the senior citizens groups, do you foresee any special breaks we might be able to get for the senior citizens or do you know of any special hardships that have been created for them?

**BURKE:** Well, all kinds of hardships have been created for them as a result of this shortage of fuel. Of course, the Arab nations have got a gun at our head and we're hearing all kinds of promising statements by Willie Ash, the Director of the Budget, last week saying it wasn't going to last too long. The back of it would be broken. And we have opposite statements being made by William Simon, czar of the fuel crisis. They're speaking with forked tongues in the Administration. One person one day predicts a very bleak outlook, and then somebody else comes up, another high official and the Administration, predicts everything is going to be all right. But you see these long lines outside the gas stations and you hear from the people back home. Unless they have a blending of these prices of the new oil with the old oil and be able to reduce the prices, I can't see of anything in the future that we can look forward to.

**MOAKLEY:** Thank you very much, Congressman Jim Burke from the Eleventh Congressional District. It's a pleasure to have you on the show. And as I say, it's a pleasure working with you everyday. But I'm very happy that you could come on the show to talk to some of the people that you and I represent and just tell them just exactly has been happening here in Congress.

**BURKE:** Thank you, Joe Moakley. It's always a pleasure to be with you.

END OF INTERVIEW