

Leo Varadkar

Taoiseach (A Thaoisigh) of Ireland

Who Is Leo Varadkar?

Leo Varadkar is an Irish politician and Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of the Republic of Ireland. He became the leader of the governing party, Fine Gael in June 2017, succeeding Enda Kenny who had led the party for 15 years. At the age of 38, Varadkar is the youngest Taoiseach in the country's history. He is also the first openly gay and mixed-race leader that Ireland has had.

Early Life and Education

Leo Varadkar was born in Castleknock, Dublin, on 18th January 1979. His father, Ashok, was born in Bombay, India, and moved to England in the 1960s and met Leo's mother, Miriam. He began studying law at Trinity College, Dublin, but later switched to medicine. Leo graduated from the school of medicine in 2003 and spent several years working at St. James' Hospital and Connolly Hospital, Dublin. He qualified as a general practitioner in 2010. Varadkar has two older sisters: Sophie and Sonia.

Political Life

While he was at secondary school, Leo Varadkar joined Fine Gael. At college, he was active in Young Fine Gael and became the vice-president of the Youth of the European People's Party. He unsuccessfully contested his first election in 1999, at the age of twenty, but was later co-opted onto Fingal County Council. Varadkar was elected to the Dáil Éireann at the 2007 general election and became a Teachta Dála (TD). He is seen as a centre-right conservative and a supporter of austerity measures.

Dáil Éireann

As a TD, Leo Varadkar became party spokesperson for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. When Fine Gael formed a coalition government with Labour, he was made the Minister for Transport. He later became Minister for Health, where he received criticism for cutting €12 million from the annual mental health care budget. From May 2016, Varadkar was the Minister for Social Protection and has said that Fine Gael should represent those 'who got up early in the morning'. However, some people have raised concern about a recent campaign against benefits cheats and comments about workers' rights.



Personal Life

Leo Varadkar was a prominent supporter of the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum. During an interview for RTÉ radio on his 36th birthday, Varadkar spoke publicly for the first time about being gay. His partner, Matthew Barrett, is a doctor at Mater Misericordiae University Hospital.

“It’s not something that defines me. I’m not a half-Indian politician, or a doctor politician or a gay politician for that matter. It’s just part of who I am, it doesn’t define me, it is part of my character I suppose.”

Leader of Fine Gael

On 17th May 2017, former Taoiseach and leader of Fine Gael, Enda Kenny, announced that he was going to stand down as party leader. In the election that followed, Varadkar beat his opponent, Simon Coveney, to become leader of Fine Gael.



“If my election shows anything it’s that prejudice has no hold in this Republic. When my father travelled 5,000 miles to build a new home in Ireland, I doubt he ever dreamed his son would grow up to be its leader.”

Leo Varadkar’s acceptance speech on becoming leader of Fine Gael.

Taoiseach

Enda Kenny remained Taoiseach until the new leader of Fine Gael had been elected. On Tuesday 13th June 2017, Kenny sent a letter of resignation to President Michael D. Higgins. Leo Varadkar was elected Taoiseach the next day. Varadkar will face many challenges as Taoiseach. Two of the main ones are restoring devolution in Northern Ireland and dealing with Brexit. Varadkar has also said that he wants to tackle inequality in Ireland.

Questions

1. How old was Leo Varadkar when he became Taoiseach?

2. Give three reasons why Leo Varadkar is a notable Taoiseach.

3. What did he study? Where did he study?

4. What does TD stand for?

5. For how many years was Varadkar a TD before becoming Taoiseach?

6. Which of his decisions as Minister for Health was unpopular amongst some people?

7. Why do you think this was?

8. What do you think Varadkar meant by those 'who got up early in the morning'?

9. Read the quote from Varadkar's acceptance speech. How do you think his father might feel about him becoming Taoiseach? Why?

10. Name three things Varadkar will have to deal with as Taoiseach.
