

Gallagher, Denis (Ó Gallchóir, Donncha)

by Terry Clavin

Gallagher, Denis (Ó Gallchóir, Donncha) (1922–2001), government minister and community activist, was born 29 December 1922 in Currane, within the parish, though not the island, of Achill, Co. Mayo, the son of John Gallagher, merchant, of Currane, and his wife Catherine (née Gallagher). He grew up speaking English and Irish; his immediate family generally used English because his mother was monolingual. His time at Currane national school was cut short when a visiting uncle, who taught at a Marist school in Dundalk, Co. Louth, was alarmed by the poor standard of schooling and brought him back to Dundalk in 1935 for enrolment in St Malachy's. From 1937 he attended the Irish-speaking preparatory school Coláiste Éinde in Galway.

After completing his secondary education, he qualified from St Patrick's teacher training college in Drumcondra, Dublin, and taught from 1943 as a primary school teacher in Drimnagh, Dublin. A Gaelic football enthusiast, generally selected in midfield due to his height, he won a Mayo junior championship with his club Achill in 1942, and played in Dublin for Erin's Hope and Clan na Gael, representing both on the county board. He refereed the 1945 Dublin senior football final in which Charles Haughey (qv) and Jack Lynch (qv) played on opposing sides.

In 1946 Gallagher returned to Achill upon being appointed principal of the national school in Ashleam. He married (March 1948) Hannah McHugh of Keel West, Achill. They had twelve children, and lived in Keel West before moving to Cloughmore, Achill, in 1951, and then to Currane in 1960 after his appointment as principal of the local national school. He was active in the INTO, serving as chairman of its Mayo branch in the mid 1960s. After Achill GAA amalgamated with Mulranny, he captained Mulranny to the 1949 Mayo junior championship and continued to play and referee throughout the 1950s. He was also a skilled accordionist, and enjoyed sailing his yawl, being chairman of the Mayo Currach Racing Council in the 1950s.

His immersion in Gaelic culture and membership of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association complemented an uncompromising nationalism. Radicalised by high emigration from Achill and by the Fianna Fáil government's mishandling of the 1946 primary school teachers' strike and readiness to imprison and execute IRA men, he broke with his Fianna Fáil family roots by joining the new republican party Clann na Poblachta in 1948. He ran unsuccessfully as a candidate in the local elections in 1950 and 1955, falling short by ten votes in 1950, and in the 1954 general election in the Mayo North constituency. As Clann na Poblachta faded in the mid 1950s, he joined Sinn Féin, being prosecuted and fined in 1960 for holding an unlicensed church collection for Sinn Féin. His house harboured IRA fugitives during the 1956–62 border campaign.

Meanwhile, he advanced within the GAA's administrative structures, serving as chairman of the West Mayo board (1956/7), chairman of the Mayo county board (1958–61), vice-chairman of the Connacht council (1961–4), chairman of the Connacht council (1964–7), and vice-president of the GAA (1964–7). In 1967 he unsuccessfully contested the presidency of the GAA. With the IRA in abeyance by the early 1960s, he emerged as an Achill community activist, bidding to develop local tourism and fishing. In 1965 he became secretary of the Achill Fishermen's Association (subsequently the Achill Fishermen's Co-operative), and also founded the Federation of Irish Fishing Co-operatives. His lobbying secured fish storage facilities and grants to buy new boats for the Achill fishermen.

To expedite his activism, he joined Fianna Fáil in 1967 and was elected to Mayo County Council for the Westport area, remaining on the council until 1977. From the late 1960s he served on a number of regional development boards and was a member of Bord Iascaigh Mhara and the Inland Fisheries Commission wherein he upheld the interests of Mayo's part-time fishermen by opposing efforts to curtail the use of drift nets at sea. His unstinting, though ultimately fruitless, efforts to develop Mayo fishing, together with his prominence in the GAA, provided a platform for his political career.

After narrowly winning the Fianna Fáil nomination for the Mayo West constituency in the 1969 Dáil Éireann elections, he surpassed expectations by harnessing the previously divided Achill vote and nearly winning a seat. Achill's remoteness and small population made for an unpromising political base, but in the 1973 general election Gallagher benefited from anti-incumbency sentiment within an economically depressed constituency and from the fact that the sitting Fianna Fáil TDs, Joe Leneghan and Micheál Ó Móráin (qv), were out of favour with their party's leadership. The influential *Western People* newspaper strongly backed his candidacy, its star columnist John Healy (qv) being his most vociferous champion. Gaining votes in unexpected places, Gallagher overcame the presence of a strong Fine Gael candidate in Westport, the nearest large town to Achill, and became Achill's first TD as Leneghan and Ó Móráin were unseated.

Thereafter, he solidified his electoral base around Clew Bay, particularly in Westport, and also northwards along the coastal fishing communities into Erris, easily holding his seat in five further general elections. He rebuilt Fianna Fáil within Mayo West after the upheavals of 1973, driving the party's acquisition of a second seat in the 1977 election. Perhaps the most hard-working canvasser in the dáil, he impressed constituents with his low-key sincerity and willingness to engage in lengthy social interactions. He was engagingly candid in private and occasionally so in public though invariably while speaking in Irish. Anxious to avoid drawing attention to his past IRA associations, he conspicuously eschewed flights of rhetorical republicanism.

In dáil debates, Gallagher stood out for his frequent, quietly impressive contributions. He became Fianna Fáil spokesman on fisheries in 1975, leading demands for the unilateral Irish imposition of a fifty-mile national fishing zone from which foreign trawlers were to be excluded. When Fianna Fáil came to power in 1977, he knew that an embarrassing retreat on the fifty-mile fishing zone was inevitable, and gladly accepted the position of minister for the Gaeltacht. As such, he was notable for frequently providing lifts for his constituents in his state car, irritating opposition TDs by answering them in Irish to deter prolonged questioning, and energetically touring the Gaeltacht regions, where his evident enthusiasm and masterful command of the Irish language won over many cynics.

Disliking the state's policy of encouraging industrial development in the Gaeltacht for requiring an influx of English-speakers, he regarded co-operatives engaged in exploiting natural resources as more commercially realistic and more attuned to existing social patterns. From 1978, he curtailed state investment in unviable Gaeltacht industries, and later confessed his embarrassment at lobbying in cabinet for such funding. Constituents criticised him for not delivering more for them, but the Mayo Gaeltacht, Achill included, was only nominally Irish-speaking, and he accepted the need to favour authentic Gaeltacht communities. Conversely, he ensured that the previously disadvantaged English-speaking offshore islands received the same level of support as the Irish-speaking ones.

His main achievement as minister was the establishment in 1979 of a new Gaeltacht authority, Údáras na Gaeltachta, which had a cultural and linguistic function as well as an economic one. Insufficiently assertive in the face of resistance from the civil service and his own party, particularly its local councillors, Gallagher delivered a glorified version of the Gaeltacht's pre-existing industrial development authority that was dismissed by proponents of Gaeltacht self-government as lacking adequate powers in relation to planning, infrastructure, education and development. His introduction of a majority-elected board for Údáras na Gaeltachta was hailed as a step forward, but in practice damagingly politicised the new authority.

In the bitter Fianna Fáil leadership contest of December 1979, he ignored warnings from his own supporters and backed the finance minister, George Colley (qv), who had been very helpful in getting the Údáras na Gaeltachta bill through the cabinet. Colley's rival Charles Haughey prevailed, however, and Gallagher was one of four ministers to be dismissed, his somewhat pointed comments made in the immediate aftermath of Haughey's victory sealing his fate. Almost the entire cabinet had backed Colley and it was widely felt in Fianna Fáil that Gallagher had been treated harshly. Stressing the need for party unity, Gallagher distanced himself from Haughey's convinced opponents and reacted magnanimously when his constituency colleague, Pádraig Flynn, was given a junior ministry in April 1980.

Meanwhile, Gallagher encouraged his supporters to canvass the party leadership on his behalf, and during Haughey's tour of Mayo in September 1980, Gallagher's

presence on the platform in Ballina and Castlebar inspired sustained and defiant applause. Haughey bowed to this pressure and soon appointed Gallagher junior minister for industry and commerce. Gallagher was a discreet supporter of Haughey throughout the Fianna Fáil leadership struggles of 1981–3, serving as his fisheries spokesman after the party lost power in 1981, and then as junior minister for social welfare from February 1982. In October 1982 he was reappointed minister for the Gaeltacht, but only for stopgap purposes, as an election was imminent.

With Fianna Fáil back in opposition, he was spokesman for the Gaeltacht from 1983 and headed a committee responsible for increasing the use of Irish in oireachtas business. By then he was one of the most popular deputies in the dáil, though considered too unassuming and upright for his own good. When Haughey was re-elected taoiseach in 1987, he also claimed the Department of the Gaeltacht, making Gallagher his junior minister. Left the thankless task of justifying reductions in Gaeltacht spending and denied the chance to run for the European parliament, Gallagher knew his path back into cabinet was barred by Flynn, who was firmly established in Haughey's favour and who outpolled him for the first time in the 1987 election.

Gallagher's reduced prospects lessened his republican inhibitions and he condemned the proposed renewal of the extradition treaty with Britain in November 1987, and revealed his past support for the IRA during the border campaign in a December 1988 interview with an Irish-language publication. He also expressed exasperation at the manner in which all political parties merely paid lip service to the Irish language. Family circumstances were pushing him towards retirement: his wife suffered from depression, and with his children all having reached adulthood, the burden of caring for her fell on him. Following an ugly confrontation in May 1989 with protesters opposed to the introduction of a fishing-rod licence, he surprised his supporters by announcing that he would not stand in the forthcoming election. He was immediately appointed chairman of Údáras na Gaeltachta, and attended conscientiously to his duties therein before resigning in 1991.

After running unsuccessfully in the 1991 local elections, he threw himself into community work, and was the mainstay of development associations for Currane and Achill. His political contacts and familiarity with the state bureaucracy abetted the establishment of various social employment schemes and were critical in securing access to EU development funds for the entirety of Achill. The Achill Development Company was established in 1999 to administer these funds and he served as its chairman. He remained active and in good health up to his sudden illness and death in Mayo General Hospital, Castlebar, on 3 November 2001. He was buried in Polranny cemetery, Achill.

GRO (birth cert.); *Mayo News*, 15 May 1954; 21 May 1955; 7 Mar. 1959; 30 Jan., 9 July 1960; 26 Feb. 1966; 7 Jan. 1967; 9 Mar. 1968; 7 June 1969; 12 Jan. 1980; 31 Mar. 1981; 24, 31 May, 12 July 1989; 3 July 1991; 21 Sept. 1994; 14 Nov., 19 Dec. 2001; 13 Mar., 21 Aug. 2002; *Ir. Independent*, 28 Feb. 1964; 14 Feb. 1976; 2 Mar., 7 Dec. 1979; 11 May 1981; 28 Oct. 1982; 22 Sept. 1984; 19 Nov. 1987; 5 Jan. 1989; 5, 6 Nov. 2001; *Western People*, 23 Jan. 1965; 7 Jan. 1967; 31 May, 21 June, 5 July 1969; 17, 24 Feb., 3, 10 Mar. 1973; 30 Mar. 1974; 11 June, 30 July, 13 Aug., 24 Sept. 1977; 28 Oct. 1978; 22, 29 Dec. 1979; 27 Feb., 2 Apr., 4 June, 22 Oct., 3 Dec. 1980; 6 May, 3 June 1981; 9 Feb. 1983; 4 Dec. 1985; 31 May 1989; 9 Oct. 1991; 2 Jan. 2002; *Ir. Times*, 4 Feb., 14 June 1969; 16 Nov. 1976; 23 June 1977; 2 Jan., 17 May 1978; 17 Nov. 1979; 7 Apr., 18 Oct. 1980; 6 Nov. 1982; 13 Aug. 1987; 10 Nov. 2001; *Hibernia*, 12 Sept. 1969; 17 Mar. 1972; 6 Mar. 1973; 5 Sept. 1975; 5 Aug. 1977 (profile); 13 Dec. 1980; Ted Nealon, *Ireland: a parliamentary directory, 1973–74* (1974); *Western Journal*, 17, 24 June, 15 July, 14 Oct. 1977; 21 Dec. 1979; 29 Feb., 4 Apr. 1980; *Ir. Press*, 22 Oct. 1977; 26 June 1978; 22 Oct. 1978; 12 Dec. 1979; 29 Sept. 1980; 6 Dec. 1983; 17 July 1986; *Sunday Independent*, 9 Apr. 1978; 14 May 1989; 11 Nov. 2001; *Magill* (Jan. 1980); *Ir. Business* (Mar. 1981; Dec. 1983); *Business and Finance*, 11 Feb. 1982; Liam Ó Muirthile agus Donncha Ó Gallchóir, 'Agallamh na Míosa: Liam Ó Muirthile ag caint le: Donncha Ó Gallchóir TD, An tAire Stáit ag Roinn na Gaeltachta', *Comhar*, xlvii, uimh. 12 (Dec. 1988), 6–9; Ray Buckley, *The great rod war: Ireland's rod licence dispute* (1992), 126–7; Diarmuid Breathnach agus Máire Ní Mhurchú, 'Ó Gallchóir, Donncha (1922–2001)', *An Bunachar Náisiúnta Baithaisnéisí Gaeilge*, www.ainm.ie (accessed Aug. 2015)