

## Gregory, Tony

by Brian Hanley

Gregory, Tony (1947–2009), republican socialist, community activist and TD, was born 5 December 1947 in Dublin, the second of two sons of Anthony Gregory and his wife Ellen (née Judge). A native of Dublin's North Strand, Anthony Gregory had owned a shoemaker's business in Ballybough in north inner-city Dublin but, unable to make a living, became a warehouseman on Dublin docks, where he experienced regular periods of unemployment. Ellen Gregory was the daughter of small farmers in Croghan, Co. Offaly, and worked as a waitress after moving to Dublin in the mid 1920s. The couple married in 1944 and lived in a one-roomed flat in Ballybough until the 1950s. Though unable to secure a Dublin Corporation tenancy, they managed to save £700 and purchase a house in Sackville Gardens, Ballybough, where Tony Gregory lived for the rest of his life. He later reflected that 'that sort of background combined with living in an area like this, in the centre of Dublin, gave me a very acute sense of the social inequality that exists in this country. That embittered me very very strongly, particularly when I was younger. I still have that bitterness. I don't think I have ever lost it' (*Hot Press*, 21 June 1985). Gregory also spent time during his childhood in his mother's home in Offaly and retained a love of the countryside. He was especially close to his mother and deeply affected by her death in 1969. She had been a devout catholic, with an 'intense devotion to the Blessed Virgin', while Gregory himself was an altar boy and a member of the Legion of Mary in his teenage years (*ibid.*, 23 January 2009).

**Student and teacher** Gregory attended a pre-school run by the Loreto nuns in Hill Street, then a school in North William Street run by the Sisters of Charity, and finally completed his primary education at St Canice's Christian Brothers School. At his mother's prompting, Gregory took a Dublin Corporation examination in order to gain access to a place in secondary school. He recalled no encouragement from the teachers at St Canice's, who assumed that any local children who progressed to second level would attend a technical school. Gregory, however, won a scholarship to O'Connell secondary school, enrolling there in September 1960. After completing his leaving certificate in 1966, he secured a place on a BA course studying Irish and history at UCD. He worked for a summer in London at a Wall's ice cream factory in Acton to help pay for his course. Gregory was intensely aware of how different his background was from the majority of his fellow students, recalling that 'the number of kids from working class backgrounds – they stuck out like sore thumbs, half a dozen to a thousand and that was it' (*ibid.*, 21 June 1985). He rarely socialised with fellow students, partly through lack of money, and cycled home most days for his lunch. However, it was at UCD that he became politically active. He had been a member of the FCA during the mid 1960s, and around 1966 called to Sinn Féin headquarters at Gardiner Place in the hope of joining the IRA. Though rebuffed, he was impressed by the role republicans were playing in housing agitation in Dublin. He helped set up

a Republican Club in UCD, despite the hostility of the college authorities; it claimed sixty-four members by November 1968. He had joined Sinn Féin at this point and had also been recruited into the IRA. When the republican movement split into the Officials and Provisionals in 1969, Gregory remained loyal to the Official leadership. He explained later that young Dublin activists such as himself 'didn't even think of the Provos as an option' (Hanley and Millar, 147). Gregory remembered the early 1970s as a period of excitement and hope, when large numbers of young people were involved with the Official republican movement in Dublin. In 1992 he recalled that there was a 'huge radicalism among young people and probably all of that was diverted or destroyed by the North. The North blew up and it dissipated' (*In Dublin*, 5 August 1992).

After gaining his BA in 1969, he completed a higher diploma in education and qualified as a secondary-school teacher during 1970. During his diploma training year, he worked at a vocational school in Great Demark Street. Following this, Gregory worked at Coláiste Mhuire in Parnell Square and then the CBS in Synge Street. He was teaching French and history at another CBS school, Coláiste Eoin in Stillorgan, until his election to Dáil Éireann in 1982. Several former students attest to Gregory's talents as a teacher and his ability to inspire interest in history in particular. Rather than standard textbooks he often encouraged use of academic histories such as *Ireland since the famine* by F. S. L. Lyons (qv).

**Republican and community activism** Gregory remained a member of Official Sinn Féin and the Official IRA until 1973, serving on the party's education committee in Dublin and acting as education officer for his IRA unit. Gregory was heavily influenced by the senior Official IRA leader Séamus Costello (qv), who for Gregory 'personified ... the Irish republican socialist'. In the longer term, he saw his own work as a city councillor as being inspired by Costello, who had shown 'clearly at local level how revolutionary activists could organise politically' (Gregory, 1982). Gregory agreed with Costello's criticisms of the Official leadership and was angry at their attempts to sideline him. He left the Officials because, he claimed, 'everything they had espoused when I joined they were busily in the process of getting rid of' (*In Dublin*, 5 August 1992). When Costello was expelled from the Officials and subsequently set up the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) in 1974, Gregory supported him and was briefly involved with the new organisation. That split and Costello's subsequent murder by the Official IRA had a deep effect on Gregory. He asserted that 'Costello was the greatest loss that the left has ever suffered in this country since Connolly and the others were killed' (*Hot Press*, 21 June 1985). As a result, Gregory remained very suspicious of the Officials in their later incarnation as the Workers' Party (WP).

Gregory was a member for a short period of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), founded in 1977 by Noel Browne (qv) and Matt Merrigan (qv). However, he disliked the squabbling among various factions in the SLP, and began to devote himself to politics in his local area. During 1974 he helped set up the Sackville Gardens

Residents' Association, and was involved in establishing a holiday centre in Co. Cavan for inner-city youth. Through community activity Gregory came into contact with Fergus McCabe and Mick Rafferty, who, along with Gregory's elder brother Noel, would be his closest political allies for the next three decades. It is an indication of Gregory's pragmatism that while he retained a republican position on Northern Ireland, both McCabe and Rafferty held anti-nationalist, 'two-nationist' views. Gregory believed that differences on such issues did not preclude effective work in the local community. The men were among the key activists behind the North Central Community Council (NCCC), coordinating local tenants and community groups. In May 1979, Gregory, then secretary of the NCCC, was arrested with several of his colleagues during a sit-down protest in Gardiner Street against redevelopment plans for the area. That year he contested the elections for Dublin Corporation as an independent community candidate and won a seat, polling 1,727 votes. He remained a councillor until 2004. He claimed that 'the local councillors were totally out of touch with anything that was going on in the north inner city. It absolutely amazed me that any of them could have been elected ... it seemed self-evident to me that we as a community group would have no difficulty with getting someone elected' (*In Dublin*, 5 August 1992). Gregory had few allies on Dublin Corporation and initially had 'no good word to say about any of them', but he quickly gained a reputation as an articulate and effective representative. A critical profile written shortly after his election described him as 'fiercely ambitious' and a likely challenger for a *dáil* seat in the future (*Hibernia*, 25 October 1979). During 1980, Gregory criticised 'establishment' politicians for their failure to address poverty and inequality in inner Dublin, but also chided the left for being more concerned by ideology than concrete reform. He contended that big business and multinational capital would ignore traditional working-class areas and their concerns unless forced to by governments (*ibid.*, 25 August 1980).

**The 'Gregory deal'** Gregory stood for the *dáil* as an independent candidate in Dublin Central in the June 1981 general election. Though not elected he received 3,151 votes (6.8 per cent), coming seventh in a five-seat constituency. The period of instability under the Fine Gael–Labour coalition culminated in another general election in February 1982 which Gregory again contested. He won 4,703 votes (10.3 per cent), taking a seat from Fine Gael's Alice Glenn and finishing ahead of the Labour party leader Michael O'Leary (qv). The result of the election, with no party strong enough to form a majority government, left Gregory, the other independents and small parties in a potentially powerful position. Gregory favoured an alliance of the left, and in early March he and Limerick TD Jim Kemmy (qv) announced that they would be interested in forming a bloc with the three TDs of Sinn Féin the Workers' Party (SFWP). However, in Gregory's view SFWP were not seriously interested in this idea, while Kemmy was determined to vote for Fine Gael's Garret FitzGerald (1926–2011) as taoiseach. In the meantime, Gregory and his supporters were approached by the leaders of both major parties seeking support. Amid intense media interest, the 33-year-old TD became a 'kingmaker', holding talks with both FitzGerald and Fianna Fáil's Charles Haughey (qv) at 20 Summerhill Parade, the

offices of the north-inner-city Community Action Project. Gregory's negotiation team consisted of McCabe, Rafferty and Noel Gregory. Though FitzGerald was accompanied by his own team, Haughey conducted talks on his own, and Gregory found it far easier to deal with him than with FitzGerald. He later asserted that while it was 'inconceivable' that he would have supported 'a pro-British, anti-national coalition gang like that led by FitzGerald', McCabe and Rafferty had been open to the Fine Gael leader on account of his liberal credentials. But an agreement was struck with Haughey, immediately christened the 'Gregory deal' (though Gregory insisted that its proper title was the 'programme for government'.) The agreement promised over £100 million funding for housing, community education, employment and the development of the north inner-city area (Gilligan, 196–223).

Gregory told the dáil that his decision was 'purely tactical and based on achieving as many as possible of the issues I was elected on' and that 'once a government has been elected they will receive my support only in so far as they pursue the programme of agreed commitments and other acceptable policies to me' (ibid., 89–90). Unease was expressed, particularly from Haughey's many critics, that one TD had been able to wrest such concessions. Gregory recalled that 'people from middle-class areas reckoned I was bribed by Haughey ... I had houses everywhere and yachts' (Sheehan (1985)). On the left there were accusations that Gregory had 'turned his back on true socialism' and put 'parish pump politics in an urban setting ... on a lavish scale' (*Workers Life*, April 1982). The programme was not implemented because the Fianna Fáil government soon fell over proposed spending cuts, a dáil vote on which Gregory abstained. Gregory defended the deal on the basis that for the 'most disadvantaged urban area in this country' such reforms were 'worthwhile and morally essential' (Gilligan, 101). He retained his seat in the November general election, his first-preference vote increasing to 6,237 (14 per cent), and he would remain a TD for the next twenty-seven years.

**Independent TD** Despite Gregory's success as a parliamentarian, many on the left were suspicious of him. There was criticism of his concentration on local issues, and insinuations that he downplayed controversial issues such as abortion lest it affect his vote. Gregory would strongly maintain that the key issue for 'any left-wing politician must be talking about a change of attitude of working people – having them reject the establishment, the traditional parties. They're only going to do that if you can influence them and to do that you're going to have to be involved with them on the issues that concern them.' He also contended that 'so many of the people who claim to represent the left are middle class. That's a huge change from the time when Official Sinn Féin was quite a strong organisation in Dublin and the vast majority of its membership was working-class young people' (*Gralton* (1983)). He was not solely devoted to localism. Despite his fractious relationship with SFWP (after April 1982, the WP), he was the only TD to support a divorce bill put forward by the party in 1983. In June 1984 he joined the two WP TDs in walking out of Leinster House during a speech by US president Ronald Reagan. In 1994 he was part of the international corps of parliamentary observers delegated to South Africa

to observe that country's first free elections. He visited the Palestinian occupied territories on two occasions, and was part of a delegation to Cuba in 2001. Gregory opposed both the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars and the use of Shannon airport by US forces. Deeply interested in animal rights, he served as vice-president of the Irish Council Against Blood Sports and in 1993 moved a dáil private member's bill to ban live hare coursing. Gregory was also prominent in campaigns for the release of the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four prisoners.

Gregory's republican views marked him out from most of his fellow politicians in the 1980s and 1990s. He argued in 1985 that 'if you are struggling for a just society and for liberation ... you cannot ignore the fact that part of this country is occupied by British troops. They are very much part of imperialism ... this is as much an anti-imperialist struggle as Nicaragua is or anywhere else. If you close your eyes to that in your own country you can't claim to be a socialist or to be anti-imperialism.' However, he also criticised the Provisional IRA's military tactics, arguing that they were counterproductive (*Hot Press*, 21 June 1985). He worked alongside Provisional Sinn Féin at a time when they were regarded as pariahs by the political establishment, most notably in the Concerned Parents Against Drugs movement (CPAD) during the 1980s and in similar organisations in later years. Gregory's constituency was one of the areas most affected by heroin abuse. He supported CPAD as a genuine effort by local people to confront the problem. Describing both the attraction and impact of drug dealing he reflected that 'if you're living in poverty and you see your kids growing up and you see on TV every night of the week ... extreme affluence ... you want to have some of that for your kids and the only possibility they see of achieving that is to go out and take it. Go out and rob a bank, rob a payroll, rob a post office. And to me the people who do that are not the evil-doers. The evil-doers are the ones who flaunt those things in their face.' But, Gregory argued, heroin dealers 'went way beyond that ... they saw the possibility of making a huge amount of money with little or no risk to themselves and the only problem was that to make that money they had to destroy their own class, kids of their own class, their own families even. And they consciously decided to do that ... that's what makes them so despicable in my mind, and that's why they have to be destroyed themselves' (ibid.). In relation to heroin, Gregory asserted that 'there's only one position you can take ... use whatever resources we have against it' (*In Dublin*, 5 August 1992). Gregory rejected accusations that CPAD was a front for the Provisional IRA or a vigilante movement. He contended that the media and establishment had been relatively unconcerned at how inner-city areas were being ravaged by heroin until ordinary people mobilised against it. Gregory was strongly in favour of increased Garda powers to deal with the drug trade and lobbied for the setting up of the Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB). He also supported longer prison sentences for drug dealers. On other issues he was less willing to support the police. From 1982 onwards he was involved in the campaign by Dublin street traders to hold their pitches against the opposition of local businesses. In 1986 he was jailed for two weeks as a result of this campaign. He claimed that 'when business firms demand gardaí action against unfortunate street traders, the gardaí arrive in force but when

tenants or priests or community workers look for help against heroin pushers, the gardaí all but ignore them. The moral seems to be that the gardaí are a tool of the rich to be used against the community' (Gilligan, 146).

**Personality and legacy** A 1982 profile described how Gregory 'does not inspire affection, and he is not interested in doing so ... he has no personal life to speak of; he seldom takes a drink; he has supporters but few friends' (*In Dublin*, 4 March 1982). Sometimes abrasive in his dealings with both colleagues and rivals, Gregory was acutely aware of the potential vulnerability of his seat. Dublin Central underwent several boundary changes during his time as its representative. His core vote came from the poorest part of the inner city, where there were high levels of abstention from politics. To retain office he had to win support in more middle-class districts as well as maintain his base in the face of competition from the Workers' Party, Sinn Féin, Labour and Fianna Fáil's Bertie Ahern. As a result he could be extremely hostile to potential rivals, especially other left-wing independents (personal information). He was famously frugal, reusing old election literature rather than spending money on new posters and leaflets at every election.

Though unmarried, Gregory was in a long-term relationship with Annette Dolan up to his death. He expressed regret towards the end of his life at not having had children, and reflected on a college romance that involved a 'certain amount of unrequited love' (*Hot Press*, 22 January 2009). Friends attested to a warmer side to his personality than that seen in public. Reflecting in one of his last interviews on his agreement with Haughey, he claimed that the anti-drugs movement and the campaign for street traders had been 'just as important' as the famous 'deal.' After a year-long battle with stomach cancer, Gregory died in St Francis Hospice, Raheny, Dublin, on 2 January 2009, aged 61. Though not a practising catholic, he received a church funeral at St Agatha's in North William Street, where he had once been an altar boy. Reflecting on the tributes paid to Gregory, his colleague Councillor Maureen O'Sullivan claimed that he had been 'systematically excluded by every political party from the position of lord mayor and any other position on Dublin City Council'. She asserted that many of those who had lavished praise on him after his death would now be getting 'the Gregory look ... the sardonic one' (*Jr. Times*, 8 January 2009). At Gregory's request, his funeral at Balgriffin cemetery was confined to close friends and allies, with Socialist Party TD Joe Higgins delivering the graveside oration. In a by-election in May 2009, O'Sullivan took the seat vacated by Gregory's death, and retained it in the 2011 general election. Gregory's legacy remains in the attention his campaigning drew to the poorest and most neglected parts of Dublin city and his highlighting of issues often ignored by the mainstream, such as the impact of heroin addiction on the inner city.

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*Ir. Times*, 9 Jan. 1969; 20 Sept. 1978; 11 June 1979; 5, 8 Jan. 2009; Máirín de Burca, 'Tony Gregory: independent councillor', *Hibernia*, 25 Oct. 1979; Tony Gregory, 'Political viewpoint: inner city neglect', *ibid.*, 14 Aug. 1980; *Dáil Éireann debs.*, cccxxxiii, no. 1 (9 Mar. 1982); Tony Gregory, 'Seamus: the people's councillor' in Seamus Costello Memorial Committee, *Seamus Costello: Irish republican socialist* (1982); Colm Tóibín, 'Tony Gregory: the making of an independent TD', *In Dublin*, 4 Mar. 1982; *Workers Life* (Apr. 1982); Tony Gregory interview, *Gralton*, no. 6 (Feb.–Mar. 1983); Ronan Sheehan, 'The press and the people in Dublin Central: Ronan Sheehan talks to Tony Gregory, Mick Rafferty and Fergus McCabe', *Crane Bag*, viii (1984); Sean Flynn and Pádraig Yeates, *Smack: the criminal drugs racket in Ireland* (1985); John Waters, 'The Irish independent', *Hot Press*, 21 June 1985; Macdara Doyle, 'Gregory's trek', *In Dublin*, 5 Aug. 1992; Henry McDonald and Jack Holland, *INLA: deadly divisions* (1994); André Lyder, *Pushers out!: the inside story of Dublin's anti-drugs movement* (2005); Jason O'Toole, 'Tony Gregory: one life less ordinary', *Hot Press*, 23 Jan. 2009; Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The lost revolution: the story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party* (2009); Robbie Gilligan, *Tony Gregory* (2011)