Glenn, Alice

by Terry Clavin

Glenn, Alice (1921–2011), politician and moral crusader, was born Alicia Duffy on 17 December 1921 in Usher's Quay, Dublin, the eldest of ten children of (Arthur) Leo Duffy, a car mechanic, and his wife Mary (née Joyce), a dressmaker. Descended from generations of Dublin artisans on both sides, she grew up on the quays, later moving with her family out to the Dublin inner suburb of Cabra.

After attending the Stanhope Street convent school until her mid teens, she completed a dress-designing course and ran a small dressmaking business with her sister, before marrying William Glenn in April 1949. A fellow inner-city Dubliner, he was then a cadet and later a pilot instructor in the Irish air force. They had two sons, but, following the first birth, she had two children stillborn, and endured a series of operations for the internal damage caused by the second stillbirth. She suffered depression, worsened by the social isolation attendant on living in a remote house near the aerodrome in Gormanstown, Co. Meath, and lifting only when she had her second son, eight years after the first.

Raised in a fervent Fine Gael household, she was appalled by the behaviour of certain Fianna Fáil government ministers during the 1970 arms crisis, and joined the local Fine Gael branch. By then she was living in Glasnevin, Dublin, where she had been active for some years in local women's clubs and as a voluntary social worker. She progressed rapidly through Fine Gael's moribund grass-roots structures and stood as party candidate for the Dublin North-Central constituency in the 1973 general election. She failed to win a seat but polled reasonably well, and the won a Dublin Corporation seat in 1974. Her supportive husband ignored concerns that her politics could hurt his promotion chances and became commanding officer of the Air Corps under a Fianna Fáil government in 1980.

Impressing as a populist, hard-working local councillor focused on practical issues such as food prices, housing and health, she served as chairwoman of the Dublin Corporation housing committee (1977–9 and 1980–81), and was the first woman member of the Dublin Port and Docks Board (1979) and the first woman chair of the Eastern Health Board (1982). Her moral conservatism was evidenced by her vocal opposition in 1973–4 to a proposed relaxation of the ban on selling contraceptives, and by a 1978 speech urging the 10,000 married women working in the public sector to alleviate unemployment by quitting their jobs. Sternly righteous on such matters, she was otherwise warmly garrulous, and enlivened social occasions with her fine singing.

Upon doubling her first-preference vote in her unsuccessful 1977 general election bid for the redrawn Dublin (Finglas) constituency, she developed a bitter personal
rivalry with her running mate, Luke Belton, who was part of a right-wing, north-Dublin party clique averse to Fine Gael's liberal turn under the leadership of Garret FitzGerald (1926–2011). Aligning accordingly with Fine Gael's progressive wing, she shared with her allies a belief in more generous social provision, and was backed by a national executive keen to advance women. Belton's machinations denied her the lord mayoralty of Dublin in 1978 and 1980, and the nomination for the 1979 local elections at the selection convention, obliging FitzGerald to restore her to the ticket.

Initially a supporter of Dublin Corporation's redevelopment of the historic Wood Quay site, she stole a march on Belton by changing tack as popular resistance to the scheme intensified and, after outpolling him in the 1979 local elections, narrowly captured his Dublin Central seat in the 1981 general election. Predominately composed of poor inner-city areas, the Dublin Central constituency was an inhospitable environment for Fine Gael candidates, and she lost out in the February 1982 general election, despite increasing her vote. Failing in the succeeding seanad election, she withstood efforts to deselect her for the November 1982 general election, in which she regained her dáil seat.

She emerged thereafter as an unyielding critic of the Fine Gael–Labour coalition government's secularising initiatives, having already embarrassed FitzGerald at Fine Gael's October 1982 ard-fheis by reminding delegates of his pledge – about which he was having second thoughts – to introduce a constitutional amendment upholding unborn babies' right to life. In April 1983 she was among a pivotal handful of government deputies who thwarted the coalition's proposed pro-life amendment because it failed to prohibit future legislation for abortion, and instead forced a more broadly phrased clause through the dóil. She defied FitzGerald's attempts to impose neutrality on his deputies in the ensuing referendum and clashed publicly with liberal Fine Gaelers while campaigning for the amendment, which carried easily.

Declaring she would not follow the party line if it violated catholic teaching, she kept sniping at FitzGerald, and committed the ultimate Fine Gael heresy of praising Éamon de Valera (qv) (for embedding catholic values in the constitution). She thus embarked on a short yet intense period of national celebrity, and neglected constituency work for her role as a moral crusader. Despite her penchant for flamboyant hats, her otherwise severe and sharply tailored dress sense drew comparisons with Margaret Thatcher. Welcoming this, she also expressed admiration for Ronald Reagan and joined the World Anti-Communist League, which controversially supported the 'contra' paramilitaries opposing the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

Lampooned relentlessly by journalists, and even referenced in a Christy Moore song, 'Delirium tremens', she courted media martyrdom and relished provoking liberal sensibilities by claiming variously that children of married parents deserved to take precedence over those born out of wedlock, that single women were getting pregnant to exploit the welfare system, and that making condoms freely available
would cause an AIDS epidemic. Although she could never contain her predilection for apocalyptic pronouncements, her arguments became more articulate and coherent over time, while most commentators acknowledged the sincerity underlying her attention-seeking, ultra-catholic diatribes.

Glenn forfeited the party whip in February 1985 by voting against a government bill permitting unmarried adults to buy contraceptives, before being accepted back in November owing to the lack of alternatives for Fine Gael in Dublin Central. She was prominent in the summer 1986 referendum on legalising divorce; her comment that wives voting for divorce were like turkeys voting for Christmas became the campaign's most quoted line and encapsulated the anti-divorce side's success in playing on women's fears of financial destitution. Despite projecting a morally sheltered, middle-class aura, she had a sister who was deserted by her husband and a son who was divorced and lost custody of his daughter; Glenn raised the granddaughter in question for several years, and was distraught when she went to live with her mother in Australia.

After the defeat of the divorce amendment, her position in Fine Gael became untenable, as she quarrelled bitterly with party colleagues, condemned the government's intended reforms of the childcare laws for threatening the primacy of the family, and expressed opposition to further European integration and to a new extradition law. The national executive had been trying to persuade an unwilling local party to nominate her for the upcoming general election, but desisted on the eve of the selection convention in November 1986, when liberal Fine Gael deputies publicised an earlier statement she had made branding various groups as 'enemies of the people', including the leadership of all the main religions except her own. This inadvertent insult to non-catholics was widely condemned and she resigned from Fine Gael before she could be expelled.

As an independent candidate in the February 1987 general election, she was well received in working-class areas, but this did not translate into first-preference votes, and she lost both her seat and deposit amid the collapse of her middle-class support base. Continuing as an independent councillor on Dublin Corporation, she bartered her swing vote for the position of deputy lord mayor (1987–9), and became the first woman chair of the Dublin Port and Docks Board (1991). Otherwise, she receded into obscurity, playing a minor role in subsequent abortion and divorce referenda.

She retired from politics after losing her seat in the 1991 local elections, and later moved to Ballinteer, Co. Dublin. From 2005 she lived in Our Lady's Manor Nursing Home, Dalkey, Co. Dublin, dying there on 16 December 2011. She was buried in Glasnevin cemetery.