

Wyse, (Jeremiah) Pearse

by Patrick Maume

Wyse, (Jeremiah) Pearse (1923–2009), politician and community activist, was born 2 March 1923 at 69 Barrack Street, Cork city, son of John Wyse (or Wise), pawnbroker's clerk, and his wife Julia (née Cronin), a native of Macroom. His father's death, when Wyse was 'confirmation age' (14–15), and consequent family responsibilities may explain why he remained single well into his 40s, living on Barrack Street (a traditional, inner-city working-class area south of the River Lee) with his mother and two sisters; he also had at least two brothers. He married (9 October 1976) Theresa Lucey, a civil servant, from Inchigeelagh, Co. Cork; they had one son, and lived in the Cork city suburb of Ballinlough, where Wyse spent the remainder of his life.

Wyse was educated at Greenmount national school in Cork, and at Cork College of Commerce, where he trained as a bookbinder and paper cutter. He was employed at the Eagle Printing Works, where by the early 1960s he became works manager, and was a longstanding member of the Irish Bookbinders' and Allied Trades' Union. In the mid 1950s Wyse was a founder member of St Finbarr's Athletic Club, Cork; for several years he was club secretary, subsequently acted as vice-president and president, and worked to resolve divisions between the GAA and the athletics federation Bord Lúthchleas na hÉireann (BLÉ). Throughout his career Wyse promoted sporting activities, and his athletic interests helped pave his way into community work and politics; from 1972 he was president of Cork Community Games. He was active in numerous local charities and supported the credit union movement; in the 1980s he was chairman of the Cork branch of the Irish Red Cross.

Joining the Fianna Fáil party (c.1947), at the 1957 party ard fheis he proposed a motion calling for the relaxation of film censorship. He was first elected to Cork Corporation in 1960, soon joining other local bodies (including Cork harbour board, the Southern Health Board (from 1961), the library committee and the mental hospital visiting committee), and in 1963 was spoken of as a possible candidate in a dáil by-election in Cork Borough; he became a TD for the constituency at the 1965 general election, and thereafter was a full-time public representative, serving in Dáil Éireann for twenty-seven years (1965–92).

Wyse was encouraged to pursue a dáil career by Jack Lynch (qv), and intense personal loyalty to Lynch shaped Wyse's political course. Both were quiet men and pipe-smokers, and Wyse regarded Lynch as a personal friend. He was strongly supportive of Lynch in the party divisions after the 1970 arms crisis, and in a 1973 eve-of-poll rally declared him 'the greatest leader Ireland has ever produced' (*Ir. Times*, 27 February 1973). Unlike Lynch, Wyse was primarily a local Cork politician. (In August 1973 he was the only Fianna Fáil deputy who admitted never having

visited Northern Ireland.) His personal electoral power base (centred on the southside areas of Barrack Street and Ballinlough) was built up through extensive work on local issues; his position on Cork Corporation (where he regularly topped the poll in the South Central ward with the highest personal vote of any corporation member) was as important for him as the dáil. Wyse was lord mayor of Cork in 1967–8 and 1974–5. During his first mayoral term, he put forward proposals for the creation of community associations and the building of community centres in the new suburbs, and in the following years advanced this through his chairmanship of the coordinating Cork Community Services Council and its associated Cork Community Trust (funded by locally based industries). He regularly made speeches on such problems as the need to address social isolation of vulnerable groups and to provide facilities for troubled young people (though he thought incorrigible vandals should be dealt with severely), the nascent drug problem (in 1969), and Cork's notorious litterbugs. He was involved in local campaigns to save and modernise Skiddy's Home (a charity for the elderly based in an almshouse dating back to the early seventeenth century) and the Savoy cinema. He resigned from Cork Corporation on appointment as a junior minister in 1977, but returned in the 1980s and was deputy lord mayor in 1984–5.

His political activities in the 1960s and early 1970s rested on political brokerage to secure new foreign investment for Cork (particularly through the industrial development of the Cork Harbour area) during the economic boom inaugurated by Seán Lemass (qv). Wyse aimed to deploy some of the revenues earned for social and community services; an *Irish Press* journalist saw in Wyse's plans for the social role of the community associations an attempt to re-create in the new suburbs the spirit of traditional working-class districts. In the 1969 and 1973 general elections, Wyse was the leading Fianna Fáil candidate in the three-seat Cork City South-East constituency, topping the poll and bringing in his running mate, Gus Healy (qv). As early as 1969, Wyse was seen as a potential junior minister. After the defeat of Fianna Fáil at the 1973 election, Wyse was party spokesman on youth and community care and prominent in the party's attempts to secure the newly influential youth vote; he repeatedly accused the Fine Gael–Labour coalition of talking up the Northern Ireland troubles to obscure their disastrous economic record. In 1977 Wyse's vote dropped significantly after the redrawing of constituency boundaries put him in the Cork City constituency with Lynch, while consigning many of his supporters on the city's western fringes to the largely rural Mid-Cork constituency; this led some commentators to underestimate Wyse's electoral strength.

After the Fianna Fáil landslide in the 1977 general election, Wyse was appointed parliamentary secretary (from January 1978, styled minister of state) in the Department of Finance, with responsibility for the Office of Public Works (OPW). He shepherded significant legislation through the seanad, and travelled around the country opening new drainage schemes (which opposition politicians claimed were prioritised in accordance with Fianna Fáil's political advantage), school buildings

and Garda stations, and intervened to speed up restoration of the Charles Fort monument in Kinsale.

Wyse's responsibility for the OPW involved him in the ongoing controversy over the construction of new civic offices for Dublin Corporation at Wood Quay, where extensive remains of the medieval viking city had been uncovered by archaeologists. After the site was declared a national monument on 30 June 1978 as the result of a high court action, Wyse repeatedly declared that he favoured construction of the civic offices but that additional time would be allowed for excavation, and that the government had yet to take a final decision; he implied that the National Monuments Advisory Council shared this position, and was severely criticised when a leaked report revealed that the council favoured the site's preservation. When it was revealed in March 1979 that the government had executed (on the previous 29 August, before some of Wyse's statements) a legally irrevocable permission for the demolition of the national monument, Wyse was accused of deliberately misleading both the oireachtas and the public. It was widely suggested that Wyse's and Lynch's attitude to Wood Quay (and that of the Cork-based archaeologist Michael J. O'Kelly (qv), who dismissed the site as 'a hole in the ground') derived from Cork provincialism. In an article entitled 'Will Corkmen Destroy Wood Quay?' (*Ir. Times*, 4 December 1978), journalist John Healy (qv) suggested that they would have acted differently if the Cork Opera House or Skiddy's Home were being demolished.

A committed supporter of George Colley (qv) in the 1979 Fianna Fáil leadership contest, Wyse was sacked as a junior minister on the accession of Charles Haughey (qv) as taoiseach in December 1979. He never again held ministerial office; thereafter, his political career was defined by opposition to Haughey. His constituency position (from 1981, in Cork South-Central) was affected by internal party division over Haughey's leadership (with Gene Fitzgerald (qv) being associated with the Haughey camp) and by the redrawing of constituency boundaries, which transferred part of Wyse's support base to Cork North-Central, while Fitzgerald and another outgoing Fianna Fáil TD, Barry Cogan, stood in Cork South-Central and were seen as encroaching on Wyse's support. Wyse resisted pressure to move north, and in the 1981 general election ran neck and neck with Fitzgerald (behind Peter Barry of Fine Gael); Lynch had signalled his sympathies by being photographed with Wyse and a northside candidate, Máirín Quill. In the February 1982 general election, Wyse headed the poll in South-Central and was elected on the first count (with Barry and Fitzgerald close behind).

During subsequent upheavals, Wyse was one of the most determined of Haughey's internal opponents, praised by sympathisers for taking on his leader with 'steely courage'. In October 1982 Wyse seconded the motion of no confidence in Haughey's leadership moved by the Kildare TD Charlie McCreevy; while other dissidents suffered electorally at the November 1982 general election, Wyse increased his vote substantially (partly reflecting pro-Lynch sympathy in Cork). During the leadership crisis in early 1983 following the revelation that justice minister Sean Doherty (qv)

had tapped the telephones of journalists close to Haughey's opponents, Wyse directly challenged Haughey's explanations at party meetings and publicly (and mistakenly) predicted that Haughey would soon depart.

After failing to depose Haughey in 1983, many opponents accepted defeat. Wyse, however, spoke and voted in small minorities against the expulsions of Desmond O'Malley and Mary Harney from Fianna Fáil, and privately criticised Haughey's intransigent position on Northern Ireland. As O'Malley moved towards the creation of a new party – the Progressive Democrats (PDs) – in the second half of 1985, Wyse was seen as one of its likeliest potential recruits, although he was hesitant because of his long-standing ties within Fianna Fáil and because many of his voters and activists might not follow him out of the party.

On 20 January 1986 an emotionally overwhelmed Wyse announced his defection before an overflow audience at the PDs' first public meeting in Cork; he later became the party's dail spokesman on health, social welfare and labour. His principal importance was in adding to the PDs' dail strength and electoral chances; he was not particularly attuned to the new party's economic and social liberalism, and was unenthusiastic about PD support for the 1986 referendum proposal to legalise divorce. In the 1987 general election Wyse topped the poll in his constituency with almost 11,000 votes. He subsequently served as PD spokesman on social welfare (1987–8), and on labour and the public service (1988–9).

In the 1989 general election, Wyse sought to blame continuing economic distress following the demise of several major Cork firms in the mid 1980s on the Haughey government's neglect of Cork, but the waning of initial enthusiasm for the PDs and nascent economic recovery saw many former Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael voters return to their traditional allegiances, while Wyse was damaged by the emergence of the Ballinlough-based Fianna Fáil councillor Micheál Martin as a powerful vote-getter. Wyse's vote halved and he sank to seventh place on the first count, but took the third of five seats on Fine Gael transfers. (Wyse would retain his personal vote in the 1991 local elections, but the Cork Progressive Democrats organisation was now in disarray, consisting of little more than the personal followings of Wyse and the North-Central TD Máirín Quill.)

Wyse was publicly hostile to the formation in 1989 of a coalition government by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats; until almost the last moment, he maintained that Haughey's resignation should be a precondition as a matter of principle rather than personal animosity. Wyse subsequently became chairman of the PD parliamentary party and a delegate to the Council of Europe, while remaining party spokesman on labour and social welfare.

In early 1992 Wyse denied rumours that he might return to Fianna Fáil after Haughey's departure as taoiseach. At the same time, his differences with the party on social issues were highlighted by his support for a constitutional amendment

to reverse the supreme court's 'X-case' decision allowing abortion under certain circumstances, while PD junior minister Mary Harney publicly opposed such an amendment. Rumours circulated that the party leadership wished Wyse to retire at the next election in favour of the PDs' Munster-based MEP Pat Cox, who might have a better chance of retaining the seat. Wyse did in fact stand down at the 1992 general election (in which Cox held the seat with an increased vote) but denied he had been pressurised. Wyse retained his Cork Corporation seat as a PD until 1999, and was deputy lord mayor in 1995–6; he remained involved in various local campaigns, such as the call for an inquiry into the 1968 Tuskar Rock air disaster (which took place during his first mayoral term).

Pearse Wyse died 28 April 2009 in St Finbarr's Hospital, Cork, after a short illness. Outside Cork he was chiefly remembered for his opposition to Haughey, but his political heyday was in fact the community activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Some commentators saw his style of clientelist politics as harmful and outmoded, and by the time of his retirement he seemed a deeply old-fashioned figure. He can be seen, however, as a figure of the Lemass era with its balance of conservatism and modernity, and his long-term popularity derived from recognition of his genuine concern for the constituents whose lifestyle he shared.

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GRO (birth, death certs.); *Ir. Times*, 20 Nov. 1957; 14, 18 Nov. 1963; 17 Feb., 7 Oct. 1966; 1 July, 10 Aug. 1967; 22 Apr., 10, 26 June, 9 Oct. 1968; 17 Feb., 14, 21, 24 Oct. 1969; 28 Oct., 23 Nov., 4 Dec. 1971; 6, 19 Jan., 24 Nov. 1972; 27 Feb., 8 Mar., 28 July, 20, 21 Aug. 1973; 21 June, 10 Oct., 29 Dec. 1974; 27 Jan., 22, 27 May, 10 July, 8 Dec. 1975; 20 Mar., 8 Nov. 1976; 31 May, 18 June, 6, 7, 13, 21, 23 July, 15 Dec. 1977; 14, 24 Apr., 17 May, 4 July, 1, 8, 22 Sept., 18 Oct., 30 Nov., 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 16, 19, 20, 30 Dec. 1978; 9, 14, 16, 19, 26, 27 Mar., 2, 12 Apr., 24 May, 5, 11 July, 13, 14 Dec. 1979; 3 Dec. 1980; 7 Apr., 2, 8, 9 June, 14 Nov. 1981; 10 Aug., 5, 7, 9 Oct., 25, 27 Nov. 1982; 22, 25, 28, 29 Jan., 5, 12, 24 Feb., 14 Mar. 1983; 19 Jan., 19 May, 29 Nov. 1984; 22, 24 June, 10 Sept., 20, 28, 30 Nov. 1985; 4, 9, 10, 11, 21, 22 Jan., 23 May, 27 Nov. 1986; 27 Jan., 19 May 1987; 27 Apr. 1988; 18 May, 12, 13, 15, 20, 30 June, 1, 3, 10, 13 July 1989; 7 March 1990; 1 July, 1 Nov. 1991; 13, 21, 25 Mar., 2, 4 May, 4, 11 July, 9, 17, 24 Oct., 3, 6, 13 Nov. 1992; 26 Jan., 8, 14, 15 June, 26 Sept. 1994; 30 Mar. 1998; 31 May, 23 Oct. 1999; 29 Apr., 1, 2, 9 May 2009; *Ir. Independent*, 10 Apr. 1965; 22 Apr., 3 June 1968; 6 June 1969; 6 Sept. 1974; 29 Apr., 3, 26 May, 16 June 1975; 13 Feb., 27 May 1976; 16 Mar., 9 Sept. 1978; 21 Jan., 23 Sept. 1986; 19 Feb. 1987; 12 July 1991; 28 Jan., 4 July, 28 Oct., 7 Nov. 1992; 6 Oct. 1994; 29 Apr. 2009; *Southern Star*, 30 Oct. 1965; 22 July 1967; 10 Feb., 20 July, 10, 17 Aug. 1968; 25 Oct. 1969; 1 Apr., 21 Oct. 1972; 3 Nov. 1973; 3 Aug. 1974; 4 Dec. 1976; 19 Mar., 7 May 1983; 16 Feb., 17 Aug. 1985; 4 Jan. 1986; 13 Feb. 1988; 17 June 1989; 9 May 1992; *Ir. Press*, 3, 28 June, 2 July, 18 Aug., 11 Nov. 1969; 29 Jan. 1976; 2 June, 26 Aug., 8 Dec. 1978; 16 June

1979; 4 June 1981; 25 Jan. 1986; *Sunday Independent*, 27 July 1969; 10 Oct. 1976; 24 Dec. 1978; 7 Mar. 1979; 31 Jan., 19 Feb., 1 Mar. 1987; 3 May 2009; Vincent Browne and Michael Farrell, *Magill book of Irish politics* (1981), 91–2; Joe Joyce and Peter Murtagh, *The Boss: Charles J. Haughey in government* (1983); John Bradley (ed.), *Viking Dublin exposed: the Wood Quay saga* (1984); Thomas Farel Heffernan, *Wood Quay: the clash over Dublin's viking past* (1988); Walker, ii (1992); Antóin O'Callaghan, *The lord mayors of Cork, 1900 to 2000* (2000), 122; T. Ryle Dwyer, *Nice fellow: a biography of Jack Lynch* (2001); Frank Dunlop, *Yes, Taoiseach: Irish politics from behind closed doors* (2004); Stephen Collins, *Breaking the mould: how the PDs changed Irish politics* (2005); *Evening Echo*, 28, 29, 30 Apr., 1, 2 May 2009; *Ir. Examiner*, 29 Apr. 2009; *Cork Independent*, 30 Apr. 2009