Saving Irish national infants or protecting the infant nation? Irish anti-vaccination discourse, 1900-1930

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Infancy as a specific age-cohort increasingly attracted official interest in Ireland - as in other Western European nations - from the early twentieth century. This was reflected in medical, government and newspaper publications.[1] One example that illustrates the changes during this period is found in the *Annual Reports of the Irish Registrar-General* (*ARRG*). Reflecting the changing medical and official unawareness of the significance of infant mortality for wider population dynamics, the term 'infant mortality' is not mentioned in *ARRG* for 1900. Thirty years later, the report for 1930 devotes seven pages to infant mortality alone in addition to a section on pregnancy and childbirth.

According to Foucault, power struggles underpin every social interaction. Power shifts between diverse agencies due to a multiplicity of factors and variations of mechanisms. Michel Foucault first proposed the historical investigative

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[1] *Thirty-seventh detailed ARRG (Ireland) for 1900*, H.C. 1901[Cd. 697]; *ARRG for the Year 1930 (Saorstát Éireann)* (Dublin, 1931).

concept of biopower.[2] Medicalisation, one mechanism of biopower, refers to the specific shifting of states of power from families and individuals to the medical profession and the state. This shift, as elucidated by Foucault, brought with it an opposing force, or resistance.[3] Just as medicine and the state worked to institutionalise the power they were gathering, resistance to this process strove to direct its power network towards the final objective of revolution.[4] This article examines some motives of the agents of civil resistance engendered by the medicalisation of infancy in Ireland between 1900 and 1930. The terms 'power' and 'infant' seem incongruous. And indeed, infants were not autonomous agents in their part of the power spectrum. The premise of this article is that they became potent instruments due to the power invested in them by diverse adult pressure groups.

From the mid-nineteenth century the interest of state agencies in the age cohort of infants - representing babies under the age of twelve months - grew continuously. This was due to a perception of their increasing scarcity. Infant mortality rates had became of interest in the wider context of decreasing population figures in many European nations since

[2] Michel Foucault (trans. Robert Hurley), *The history of sexuality: an introduction* (London and New York, 1990).
[3] Ibid., p. 95.
[4] Ibid., p. 96.

the 1860s. This was of vital concern for nation states who built their international power position on population size, which in turn reflected industrial and military strength. In imperial Britain pronounced fears of population decline during the late nineteenth century existed in reference to the comparative strength of external forces. German unification in 1871 had resulted in a population of 41 million; 10 million more than that of Great Britain. This gap increased and had doubled by 1914.[5] The other possible contender for global power, North America, had more than twice the population of Great Britain.[6] In Ireland, the birth rate had decreased between 1891 and 1900, falling from 23.1 per cent in 1891 to 22.7 per cent in 1900 and the decrease continued with a drop of 9.7 per cent during the following two decades between 1911/15 and 1925/29.[7] Thus the experience at the beginning of this study was one of a falling birth rate during the previous decade. Over the entire period of the study there was a perceived population shortage in Britain and Ireland. The reasons for this decrease in fertility were not clear. Thus, the best strategy for

[5] Edward Higgs, *Life, death and statistics* (Hatfield, 2004), p. 97.
[6] Ibid., p. 97.
[7] *Thirty-seventh detailed ARRG (Ireland)*, p. 7, H.C. 1901 [Cd. 697]; *Report of the registrar-general for the year 1930 (Saorstát Éireann)* (Dublin, 1931), p. vii.

maintenance of population growth was considered to be the preservation of those infants who had been born alive.[8]

During the course of the nineteenth century the medical profession had accommodated itself with government in various ways, in some areas trading autonomy for status and influence. All stages of the lifecycle, from birth to death and indeed beyond, were being what Foucault and Illich termed 'medicalised'.[9] In relation to smallpox vaccination in Ireland, the medical profession had gained a monopoly position but in return they had become instruments of the state. Medical officers located each new-born infant in their district, performed the vaccination operations, kept records and communicated these to state agencies. They were paid pro rata by the state for vaccination work and the proportion of their income from this source could be very substantial, and in addition to their basic salary.[10]

Compulsory smallpox vaccination was primarily practised on newly-born infants. It continued over more than a century in several European and North American states and

[8] Coey Bigger, *Report on the physical welfare of mothers and children* (Dublin, 1917), p. 48.
[9] Michel Foucault, *The birth of the clinic: an archaeology of medical perception* (London, 1973); Ivan Illich, *Limits to medicine - medical nemesis: the expropriation of health* (London, 1975).
[10] Jutta Kruse, 'County Limerick vaccination records, 1884-1910' (M.A. dissertation, University of Limerick, 2007).

was well documented by both state- and medical bodies. Organised resistance formed, in Ireland as elsewhere, when freedom of choice for adults was statutorily removed. This opposition often drew on arguments from within parent/child and nationalist discourses. This form of resistance was very powerful in highly organised states, for example Britain, Germany and France, and is well documented for these countries, but to date it has not yet received due consideration in Ireland.

Ireland, a British colony at the beginning of the twentieth century, was subject to much of the same legislation as other parts of the empire. However, there were differences in statutory provision and enforcement.[11] In England, smallpox vaccination was made compulsory from 1853. This was extended to Ireland in 1863 and linked to the registration of births.[12] Parents or guardians were given responsibility to ensure vaccination of infants within six months of birth and were liable to be prosecuted if they could not prove compliance.[13] If the operation was deemed to have been

[11] Deborah Brunton, *The politics of vaccination: practice and policy in England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, 1800-1874* (Rochester, 2008).
[12] *Bill to further extend and make compulsory practice of vaccination in Ireland*, p. 267, H.C. 1863 (70) v.
[13] In 1879 in Ireland the age limit of infants to be vaccinated was reduced from six months to three months. *Bill to amend Acts relating to*

successful the parents were issued with a certificate which acted as proof that they had discharged their responsibilities under the law.[14] In England, strong and continuous opposition to compulsory vaccination developed from 1867 when legislation which had further tightened English vaccination regulation was considered too aggressively prescriptive.[15] Section 31 of this Act provided for repeated annual fines for non-compliance until the child reached the age of fourteen. Acting on advice from the exhaustive Royal Commission Report on Vaccination in 1892, the English Parliament passed a law in 1898 which provided for conscientious objection to vaccination by parents on behalf of their children in England. Furthermore, it removed the provision for cumulative penalties. Ireland and Scotland were excluded from this amelioration of the stringent regulations. Further legal revision in England in 1907 resulted in removal of default prosecutions

vaccination in Ireland, as amended in committee, p. 1, H.C. 1878-79 (135), vii, 617.

[14] *Bill to further extend and make compulsory practice of vaccination in Ireland*, pp 2-4, H.C. 1863 (70) v.

[15] Durbach asserts that early English vaccination resistance originated in the inequality with which the legislation treated different social classes. Nadja Durbach, ''They might as well brand us': working-class resistance to compulsory vaccination in Victorian England' in *Social history of medicine*, vol. 13, No. 1 (2000), pp 45-62.

from the magistrates court.[16] Again, this amendment was not extended to Ireland. These disparities were seized on by diverse Irish political insurgent movements. Some of these pressed for political independence, others for Home Rule. Continuation of this protest beyond attainment of Irish political independence emerged as part of this study and is evidence for the expediency of civil resistance for diverse political ends.

The anti-vaccination discourse became increasingly politicised in Ireland when in 1898 conscientious objection was legally provided for in England but not in Ireland. The timing coincided with strengthening Irish nationalistic discourses on many contentious social issues, for example prostitution, drunkenness or sex outside marriage.[17] These clearly problematic issues were incorporated into the ethos of diverse nation-building groupings as un-Irish, anti-nationalist attributes. From the mid-1920s, following Irish political independence and the re-assertion of the Catholic Church's influence on political policy-making, this discourse resulted in

[16] Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, 'The politics of prevention: anti-vaccinationism and public health in nineteenth-century England' in *Medical history*, vol. 32 (1988), p. 251.

[17] See, for example: Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800-1940* (Cambridge, 2007). Marie Mulholland proposes the centenary of the 1798 United Irishmen rebellion as one factor in the revival of nationalism. Marie Mulholland, *The politics and relationships of Kathleen Lynn* (Dublin, 2002), p. 28.

a series of laws intended to regulate social behaviour.[18] Ireland was in accord with wider contemporary Western culture in regard to these stern social morals.[19] Smallpox vaccination fell between the stools in this regard. A project of modern nations, approved by state and medicine, it should have passed the nationalist test with flying colours. However, it was also interpreted as a symbol of British oppression, felt as an imposition on Irish children and parents by a system of foreign government. This dichotomy resulted in a politicisation of the issue that continued, interestingly, beyond Irish independence.

The abolition of vaccination compulsion in England in 1907 represented the beginning of the decline of the English anti-vaccination movement, just as the introduction of it had provoked the formal organisation of agitation.[20] In Ireland, on the other hand, opposition to compulsory vaccination increased following this discriminatory legal revision. In 1905 Irish vaccination resistance had become organised in the shape

[18] J. H. Whyte, *Church and state in modern Ireland, 1923-1979* (Dublin, 1984), pp 24-61; J. M. Smith, 'The politics of sexual knowledge: the origins of Ireland's containment culture and the Carrigan report (1931)' in *Journal of the history of sexuality*, vol. 13, No. 2 (Apr., 2004), pp 208-9.
[19] The perception of increasing immorality was not confined to Ireland in the post-war era of the first world war. Whyte, *Church and state in modern Ireland*, p. 33.
[20] Nadja Durbach, *Bodily matters. The anti-vaccination movement in England, 1853-1907* (Durham and London, 2005), p. 201.

of the Irish Anti-Vaccination League (IAVL).[21] The timing seems to have been determined as much by a vacuum within the English anti-vaccination campaign as by strengthening of the Irish nationalist discourse. Nadja Durbach found that 'It was not until the twentieth century, when the [anti-vaccination] movement waned and the English campaign scrambled for supporters, that the plight of the Irish was taken up.'[22] This aligns with evidence from letters from the London office of the National Anti-Vaccination League (NAVL) to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in Dublin who continued her husband's anti-vaccination activism after his death in 1916.[23] Lily Loat was variously employee, secretary and editor for NAVL from 1898 until her death in 1958.[24] Her correspondence with Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in Dublin shows that Irish anti-vaccinationist agitation was directed by

[21] Receipt-book head of the Irish anti-vaccination league (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers, MS 41,214).
[22] Nadja Durbach, *Bodily matters: the anti-vaccination movement in England, 1853-1907* (Durham and London, 2005), p. 76.
[23] For the circumstances of his death, see for example: *Royal commission on the arrest and subsequent treatment of Mr. Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Mr. Thomas Dickson, and Mr. Patrick James McIntyre. Report of commission*, H.C. 1916 [Cd. 8376].
[24] Molly Baer Kramer, 'Loat, Lily (1879/80–1958)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004), (http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/view/article/50749) (26 Apr. 2011).

the London office.[25] This management of Irish civil disobedience by British campaigners seems rather paradoxical. It could be partially explained by the above-mentioned waning of raison d'être for the English movement. Also, as the following examination of some of the prominent figures in the Irish movement and their possible motivations for their anti-vaccinationist activism shows, humanitarian, socialist, non-conformist and political impulses played important roles.

Among IAVL's supporters were well-known personalities like Éamon de Valera, George Bernard Shaw, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and Alderman Thomas Kelly.[26] In 1905 de Valera had been on the Committee of IAVL.[27] This shows a certain commitment as the membership was relatively small and the officers' names were publicised on the League's letter head. At this time he had just gained a degree in

[25] Correspondence, various (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers, MS 33,606-16).
[26] Due to restrictions of space, Tom Kelly's anti-vaccinationist motives cannot be discussed here. For a biography, see: Sheila Carden, *The alderman: alderman Tom Kelly (1868-1942) and Dublin corporation* (Dublin, 2007). Alderman Tom Kelly was an influential member of Dublin city council in the early decades of the 20th century. His achievements included the replacement of slums by social housing, development of the public library service and the foundation of the municipal gallery of modern art. A committed nationalist, Kelly was a political prisoner on two occasions after the 1916 rising.
[27] Letter from Lily Loat (secretary of the national anti-vaccination league, London) to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, 15 May 1928 (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers, MS 33,606-16 .

mathematics from the Royal University and was holding various teaching posts while living in Blackrock College.[28] He was neither married nor had he children at this time and thereby is unlikely to have had personal reasons for his IAVL membership.

The summer of 1914 saw the outbreak of war between June and August.[29] This external threat made the British government more determined to tighten control of all its colonies and dominions. In Ireland, one of the consequences was stricter enforcement of smallpox vaccination legislation by the Local Government Board (LGB). Dublin city and Wexford unions were singled out as having high numbers of defaulters.[30] In October 1914 a threat by the LGB to take out a Writ of Mandamus against the openly recalcitrant Enniscorthy board of guardians had, for a time, resulted in compliance. However, this was short-lived and Wexford agitation continued to the end of this study. In Dublin in December 1914, Ernest Bannister, then secretary to IAVL, and Éamon de

[28] D. G. Boyce, 'Valera, Éamon De (1882–1975)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008), (http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/view/article/31029) (7 Apr. 2012).
[29] Beginning with the assassination of Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife on 28 June 1914 and the declarations of war in August 1914.
[30] *43rd Annual report of the local government board for Ireland, for the year ended 31st March, 1915*, p. xxvi, H.C. 1914-16 [Cd. 8016].

Valera were fined in the Southern Police Court for non-compliance with the vaccination laws.[31] Both had refused to vaccinate their young children. De Valera had by then committed himself politically by enlisting in the Irish National Volunteers.[32] His involvement in the anti-vaccination campaign in 1905 could be seen as an early expression of his civil and political consciousness, whereas his continuing commitment may have been a demonstration of his resistance to British government in general and connected with the impending Irish conscription crisis in Ireland in particular. Furthermore, there had always been popular doubts of the medical safety of vaccination and parental fear for the health of his children may have strengthened his resolve.

In 1915 the IAVL appears to have been quite active. At this time, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was vice president of the Irish Anti-Vaccination League.[33] He was born in Dublin and a well-known playwright, social commentator,

[31] 'Smart fines for non-vaccination', *Irish Independent* , 4 Dec. 1914. De Valera's first child Vivion (spelt Vivian on 1911 census return form A) was born in December 1910 (Dáil Éireann members database) or early in 1911 (1911 census return form A).
[32] Boyce, 'Valera, Éamon De (1882–1975)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008), (http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/view/article/31029) (7 Apr. 2012).
[33] Letter from Olive Bannister, 11 Appian Way, to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington on stationery of Irish anti-vaccination league, 17 Feb. 1915 (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers, MS 40, 473-1).

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an early member of the Fabian society, one of the founders of the London School of Economics and a Nobel laureate in 1925. Possibly less well-known is his involvement as a prominent anti-vaccinationist whose correspondence on this topic was printed in the *British Medical Journal,* the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and *The Times* as well as *The Inquirer*, the organ of the London National Anti-Vaccination League. Indeed, his commentary was so voluminous at times that in 1902 the *British Medical Journal* had to resort to printing his most recent letter in minute typeface so as to fit it on the available two pages.[34] In his trademark provocative language he alleged the unquestioning acceptance of compulsory vaccination as a modernising substitution for baptism by otherwise radical social reformers:[35] 'The Radicals who used to advocate, as an indispensable preliminary to social reform, the strangling of the last king with the entrails of the last priest, substituted compulsory vaccination for compulsory baptism without a murmur.'[36] Shaw's involvement in the IAVL is likely to have originated in his socialist, non-conformist engagement and

[34] 'Vaccination: The imperial vaccination league and Mr. Bernard Shaw', *BMJ* (8 Nov. 1902), pp 1557-8.
[35] Replacement of religious practices by medical and other scientific procedures is generally claimed as one of the processes of modernisation.
[36] George Bernard Shaw, *The doctor's dilemma: preface on doctors* (1909).

well-documented critical attitude to the medical profession rather than strictly nationalistic motivations.

Socialist and humanitarian ideals may also have motivated the pacifist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington. He had requested the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Aberdeen's, intercession in the case of an imprisoned vaccination objector on the occasion of his departure from office on 17 February 1915.

> May I take this opportunity of suggesting that, among the 'graces' bestowed in connection with your departure, the case of Mr. Ernest Bannister might fittingly receive your attention. Mr. Bannister is in prison for exercising in Ireland a 'conscientious objection' to vaccination which the law permits to parents in England.[37]

It is uncertain if Aberdeen did intercede, but six days later Olive Bannister, Ernest's wife, wrote to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, thanking him for his help.[38] Following his release, Ernest Bannister was billed to speak at an anti-vaccination meeting on 7 March 1915. The heading on the poster advertising the meeting demanded 'NO COERCION'. This

[37] This request followed Sheehy-Skeffington's thanking Aberdeen for his intercession on behalf of James Connolly. Carbon copy (unsigned but faint traces of signature) of letter (typed) probably from Francis Sheehy-Skeffington (because written at his address) to Lord Aberdeen, 11 Feb. 1915 (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers , MS 40, 473-1).
[38] Letter from Olive Bannister to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, 17 Feb. 1915 (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers , MS 40, 473-1).

obviously referred to compulsory vaccination. However, it also tied into contemporary Irish fears of imminent conscription of Irish men into the British army at this period of the Great War.[39]

Thousands of Irish men had already enlisted voluntarily, many probably in response to sentiments promoted by John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party in Westminster, by way of furthering the cause of Irish Home Rule. He had called on Irish men to enlist in the British Army so as to 'defend the shores of Ireland from foreign invasion' and in 'defence of right, of freedom and religion'.[40] The war was supported by many in Ireland as well as England, although many militant nationalists discouraged Irish involvement under the British flag. It was coercion or compulsion that provoked resistance, in respect of vaccination as well as enlistment. The anti-vaccinationist meeting did take place, as reported in a few words in the Irish Independent the following day.[41] After that meeting in 1915, records of agitation peter out - probably because more momentous events

[39] This was a major point of Irish resistance and it culminated in the conscription crisis of 1918. See for example: Thomas Hennessey, *Dividing Ireland, World War I and partition, the Irish convention and conscription* (London, 1998); A. J. Ward, 'Lloyd George and the 1918 Irish conscription crisis' in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1974).
[40] John Redmond, 'Woodenbridge speech', reported in the *Irish Independent*, 21 Sept. 1914.
[41] *Irish Independent*, 8 Mar. 1915.

overtook the campaign in Ireland - until it resurfaced in the late 1920s.[42]

The establishment of Irish political independence did not settle the vaccination question in Ireland. Numbers of defaulters did not decrease after 1922 and articles featuring vaccination defaulters printed in *The Irish Times* were most frequent between 1920 and 1930.[43] Although defiance was strongly localised, the numbers of defaulters were substantial. In 1926, there were 3,294 defaulters in Kilkenny.[44] In 1928, 2,295 had defaulted in Laois and 2,000 in Clare.[45] The continuation of this substantial protest would suggest that pre-independence defiance had derived from more than opposition to British governance and that the new political situation had not resolved existing opposition. One possible explanation is that the continuing non-cooperation - and its reporting in the *Irish Times* - was as an expression of a more general

[42] Following the murder of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington in 1916, his wife Hanna continued his anti-vaccinationist activism, as revealed by the letters from NAVL to her, held in the department of manuscripts of the national library of Ireland. National Library of Ireland, collection list no. 47 (N.L.I., Sheehy Skeffington papers) and collection list no. 82 (N.L.I., Sheehy Skeffington papers, additional).
[43] For an analysis of reporting in diverse Irish newspapers, see: Louise Ryan, 'The press, police and prosecution: perspectives on infanticide in the 1920s' in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, *Irish women's history* (Dublin, 2004).
[44] *Irish Times,* 4 Jan. 1926.
[45] Ibid., 12 Dec. 1928; 'Two thousand vaccination defaulters', Ibid., 17 Oct. 1928.

disagreement with the ruling pro-Treaty party, Cumann na nGaedhael.

The determination of the state to enforce the Vaccination Laws continued to the end of the period explored in this study, regardless of who constituted government. William Sears, editor and part-owner of the *Enniscorthy Echo* newspaper, had been one of the most vocal and determined of anti-vaccination agitators over a number of years. As a member of Cumann na nGaedhael and T.D. for Mayo South in 1925, he took every available opportunity to air the anti-vaccinationist cause.[46] A 1925 Dáil debate on financing of road construction served as well as any other. Sears put forward diverse objections to vaccination, for example the cost of legal prosecution of defaulters, discriminatory legislation introduced by the previous - British - government and redundancy of the process due to improved sanitary conditions.[47] Questions regarding the reasons for Sears' anti-vaccinationist stance despite his membership of the ruling

[46] T.D. is short for Teachta Dála which in English means 'deputy to the Dáil', the Irish parliament. Sears lost his seat in the June 1927 Dáil election, was elected to the Seanad - the Irish Senate - in 1928 and died on 23 March 1929; (http://www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist/) (6 Dec. 2010).
[47] Dáil Éireann debates, vol. 11, no. 18 , 21 May 1925 (Dublin stationery office).
(http://debates.oireachtas.ie/Dáil/1925/05/21/00010.asp) (6 Dec. 2010).

political party remain and could form the basis for further research in this area.[48]

An article in the *Irish Independent* from November 1927 records the beginning of the 1928 campaign to get the 'conscientious objection' clause adopted in Ireland. Four Wexford T.D.s were prepared to bring the matter of an amendment to the Vaccination Acts to the Dáil so as to meet the wishes of the people.[49] The timing of this renewed interest in the topic may have been partly determined by the appointment of a Committee on Vaccination by the British Ministry of Health in conjunction with the Medical Research Council. [50] This Committee had been set up in February 1926 with a brief to investigate the health risks resulting from vaccination.[51] Although its report was not published until July 1928, the fact that it was appointed at all would have provided evidence of serious medical concerns to those who were opposed to vaccination in Britain and Ireland.

Furthermore, the death of a child linked to vaccination in Wexford in October 1927 substantially reinforced the anti-

[48] There is a body of correspondence from William Sears to the Sheehy-Skeffingtons on diverse matters (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers, collection list no. 47).
[49] D. Allen, T.D.; Dr. J. Ryan, T.D.; O. Grattan Esmonde, T.D.; M.J. Jordan, T.D.; *Irish Independent*, 12 Nov. 1927.
[50] *Further report of the committee on vaccination*, p. 3, H.C. 1930-31 [Cmd. 3738].
[51] *Report of the committee on vaccination*, H.C. 1928 [Cmd. 3148] .

vaccinationist mood in the county. An inquiry by the local government medical inspector into the death of John Codd, a child of school-going age, had cleared the medical officer who had performed the vaccination, of negligence.[52] This finding left the community without a resolution to their grief and anger. Thus it appears that the Vaccination Act (Amendment) Bill of 1928 was initiated by local events in an atmosphere of widespread anti-vaccinationist feeling due to diverse reasons and reinforced by international research into the medical risks of vaccination.

Politically, 1927 had been a year of turmoil in Ireland.[53] Fianna Fáil had emerged for the first time as the major opposition party, led by Éamon de Valera.[54] By May 1928, he had modified his attitude to smallpox vaccination. On 11 May, his speech in the Dáil debate on the Vaccination Amendment Bill showed him distanced from the issue.[55] He frequently

[52] *Irish Independent*, 13 Jan. 1928.
[53] The ruling Cumann na nGaedhael party narrowly survived a vote of no-confidence in September and subsequently won the second general election of that year by forming a minority government. Fianna Fáil was forced to take its seats in the Dáil and its members were compelled to take the detested oath of allegiance to the British monarch.
[54] Boyce, 'Valera, Éamon De (1882–1975)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008). (http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.ul.ie/view/article/31029) (7 Apr. 2012).
[55] Éamon de Valera, *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 23, no. 12, 11 May 1928 (Dublin stationery office).

referred to anti-vaccinationists as 'they' and 'them', thereby disassociating himself from the movement. Yet, he upheld the right to choice on the grounds of personal rights and unproven medical safety of vaccination as well as emphasising the link with conscription.

> It is an invasion of one of the most intimate of personal rights. I know of no other invasion of a similar kind, except that of conscription, in which you can compel a person to die for the sake of the community.[56]

De Valera also defended the - by then historical - nationalist association of the anti-vaccinationist stance. During the Dáil debate Bill Edmond Carey, Cumann na nGaedhael delegate for Cork East, claimed that 'Anti-vaccination is foreign to the Irish people.'[57] This attempt at revisionist typecasting of anti-vaccinationists as unpatriotic and therefore anti-nationalistic was immediately countered by Éamon de Valera, then leader of the anti-Treaty Fianna Fáil in opposition: 'Not at all. Some people must have strange ideas

(http://debates.oireachtas.ie/Dáil/1928/05/11/00007.asp#N86) (6 Dec. 2010).
[56] Ibid.
[57] *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 23, no. 12, 11 May 1928 (Dublin stationery office).
(http://debates.oireachtas.ie/Dáil/1928/05/11/00007.asp#N86) (6 Dec. 2010).

about what the Irish-Ireland propaganda has been in the past when they talk like that.'[58] De Valera had modified his stance with his entry into mainstream party politics, but remained committed to the principle of non-coercion.

The Dáil debate on the Vaccination (Amendment) Bill concluded on 11 May 1928. The amendment, which would have allowed for conscientious objection to vaccination, was defeated by 75 votes to 39.[59] President W.T. Cosgrave had opposed the bill while Éamon de Valera, leader of the opposition, had supported it. [60] The tone of Lily Loat's letter to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, written some days after the vote, is disappointed but not surprised at the result. She blames a lack of anti-vaccinationist campaigners on the ground and '(...) Mr. Cosgrave's misleading speech and Mr. De Valera's rather 'hedging' one.' [61] She wondered: 'Who would imagine that de Valera was on the Committee of the Irish Anti-Vaccination League in 1905?'[62] Agitation, such as it was, had originated in London. She wrote:

[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Letter from Lily Loat (secretary of the national anti-vaccination league, London) to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington at 7, Belgrave Road, Dublin, 15 May 1928 (N.L.I., Sheehy-Skeffington papers, MS 33,606-16).
[62] Ibid.

> We sent to every member of the Dáil, on six or seven separate occasions, a pamphlet, or the Inquirer, or some leaflets, or some publication that dealt with one or other of the points that might be raised or were raised in connection with the Bill.[63]

Although the political anti-vaccinationist vote in the Dáil had not been sufficient to alter existing legislation, popular resistance to vaccination continued to the end of the period considered here. In 1930, several prosecutions for non-compliance with the Vaccination Acts were brought at Wexford district court and medical officer Dr Pierse testified that for twenty years 'scarcely any vaccination had been done'.[64]

Returning to the title of this paper, what significance did the Irish anti-vaccination campaign have? Did it reflect contemporary concern for the health of national infants nationally? Or does it indicate the seizure of the infant cohort by adult political forces for the propagation of their nationalistic interests? It appears that resistance to vaccination compulsion was a form of popular, soft protest against government, regardless of its nationality or form. Originating partially in parental distrust of the medical safety of vaccination, partially in an everyday inertia in the face of

[63] Ibid.
[64] *Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 1930.

unpleasant obligations, political and revolutionary factions seized this popular refusal-to-cooperate; in turn it was incorporated into their respective doctrines and propaganda. Thus the anti-vaccination movement was perceived as un-Irish by some and nationalistic by others. Meanwhile, the popular protest continued throughout the political upheaval of the first thirty years of the twentieth century, interpreted variously as unlawful recalcitrance, heroic resistance to foreign oppression, expression of civil consciousness, parental concern for the safety of infants - this argument was employed by both pro- and anti-vaccinators - or factional articulation of disagreement with other political parties.