

W. R. GARSIDE

UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE SCHOOL-LEAVING AGE IN INTER-WAR BRITAIN

As would be expected, the emphasis in existing accounts of the debate over the appropriate school-leaving age in inter-war Britain has been predominantly educational. The important discussions relate to the parliamentary and administrative struggles over the relationship between elementary and secondary schooling, with all its implications for central- and local-government finance, to the conflicts over the nature of any extended educational provision in different types of school, and to the potential effects of such developments on class division within society.¹

There is, however, another dimension of the leaving-age problem which so far has received only scant attention, namely the extent to which the raising of the school-leaving age was viewed in terms of its potential impact on unemployment. The consequences to an individual and to society as a whole of premature entry into industry at the expense of education, especially in areas of “blind-ally” employment, had long been recognized as harmful and were a major preoccupation of Edwardian society. But it was against the background of turbulent economic fortunes between the wars that the manipulation of the school-leaving age for industrial rather than for educational purposes was raised as a serious policy option, as a means not only of protecting the future employability of children, but also of providing some immediate relief to the growing number of jobless juveniles and adults. The purpose of this article is to examine the origins and development of this particular approach to the already controversial subject of the nature and extent of compulsory education.

I

Because of the emergency nature of juvenile wartime employment it was expected that youngsters would suffer some unemployment following

¹ One of the best surveys is B. Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940* (London, 1974).

demobilization. Even though the dislocation in the labour market was somewhat greater than anticipated,² it was never seriously suggested that relief should be sought by a universal extension of the school-leaving age. The Lewis Committee in 1917 considered but rejected such an idea as a means of reducing competition for jobs.³ Although the number of unemployed juveniles under 18 remained noticeably high by pre-war standards down to 1923, the notion of directly limiting the flow of entrants to the labour market stood very little chance of success when the question of extending compulsory school attendance on educational grounds alone received severe set-backs in the immediate post-war years. There were doubts within government and the teaching profession as to whether it was practical or educationally desirable to seek a higher leaving age in the absence both of adequate funding for the necessary teachers and accommodation, and of any widespread consensus as to how best to use the extra year of schooling. There was, moreover, a distinct fear among employers in the coal, cotton and distributive trades that such action would deprive them of a steady flow of young, cheap industrial recruits.

Local authorities were empowered by the 1918 Education Act to raise the school-leaving age by by-law from 14 to 15, subject to central-government approval. A small number of them sought such approval in the early 'twenties specifically for the purpose of relieving juvenile unemployment, but were met with stern Conservative opposition. "Apart from the financial consequences", noted a Cabinet Committee in 1923, "such a concession, if made, would be a most embarrassing and undesirable precedent."⁴ The first Labour administration was more amenable to such local enterprise due largely to the persistent demands of Trevelyan, President of the Board of Education, to have the leaving age in particular localities determined in light of prevailing employment conditions for both juveniles and adults. Although the Board was supported on the issue by the National Union of Teachers, the Independent Labour Party and the Association of Education Committees,⁵ it firmly resisted any proposal to seek a universal increase in the leaving age, believing that such an important question of educational principle and finance, to say nothing of practical politics, should not be

² See W. R. Garside, "Juvenile Unemployment and Public Policy between the Wars", in: *Economic History Review*, Second Series, XXX (1977).

³ Departmental Committee on Juvenile Education in Relation to Employment After the War, Final Report [Cd 8512] (1917).

⁴ Juvenile Unemployment Committee Report, 15 December 1923, Cabinet Papers 27/228, Public Record Office, London.

⁵ The Times Educational Supplement, 19 January, 1 March, 31 May, 13 September and 1 November 1924; 23 May 1925; The Times, 20 June 1924; National Union of Teachers, Annual Report, 1924, pp. xxvii-xxxvii.

discussed in terms of a juvenile-unemployment problem of variable regional severity and of uncertain duration.

In any event local-authority enthusiasm to seek approval for a higher leaving age for employment reasons weakened noticeably by 1925, except within Lancashire. Apart from an obvious financial commitment, many contiguous authorities in densely populated city areas realized the futility of establishing differing leaving ages when children in neighbouring areas could so easily snap up whatever jobs became available. This was just as well since the Conservative government in power from the end of 1924 quickly discouraged such piecemeal action on the leaving age even in disadvantaged areas.⁶ Its existing opposition to any positive action in this direction was further reinforced by the reports of the Ministry of Labour into the relationship between education and industry, which rejected both the principle and the supposed benefits of altering the school-leaving age to meet the needs of an emergency industrial situation.⁷

The economic and social aspects of a higher school-leaving age were never entirely divorced from the long-standing debate over the future of British elementary and secondary education which developed with such vigour after 1918. Anything which enhanced public awareness of the serious consideration given within educational circles to raising the leaving age further encouraged pressure-group activity to popularize the industrial and employment benefits likely to result from such a move. The Board of Education's *Report on the Education of the Adolescent* (Hadow Report), issued in 1927, recommended raising the minimum age of compulsory school attendance to 15 from the beginning of 1932 principally as part of a considered reorganization of the education system. In addition, however, it emphasized its concern over "the tragic paradox of a situation in which year to year some 450,000 young lives are poured into industry at a time when industry cannot find employment for its adult workers".⁸

Influential supporters of extended compulsory education, including R. H. Tawney, capitalized on the contemporary industrial malaise in order to strengthen their case. Raising the leaving age to 15, Tawney argued in 1927, would result in an annual reduction of expenditure on unemployment of between £9 million and £12 million on the assumption that the enforced 14-15-year-old vacancies would be taken up by unemployed juveniles

⁶ Cabinet Juvenile Employment Committee, 5 February 1925, Cabinet Papers 27/267.

⁷ Ministry of Labour, Report of the Committee on Education and Industry (England and Wales), Pt I (1926); Report of the Committee on Education and Industry in Scotland, Pt I (1927).

⁸ Board of Education Consultative Committee, Report on the Education of the Adolescent (1927), p. 144.

below 18, and then by unemployed adults in the ratio of one adult to two juveniles. He claimed, moreover, that the diminution in the supply of young juvenile labour would raise the wages of older juveniles, and thereby encourage employers to adopt cost-reducing improvements in production methods to compensate for the increased wage bill.⁹

Support for a higher school-leaving age as a specific weapon against unemployment increased noticeably in the late 1920's and drew much of its strength from arguments such as these. The Trades Union Congress, the Melchett-Turner Conference on Industrial Reorganisation and Industrial Relations, and both the Labour and Liberal Parties embraced the idea, though there was little general agreement as to the expected impact of such a policy.¹⁰ The Melchett Report announced in 1929, though on the basis of an incorrect estimate of the total number of juveniles likely to be withdrawn from the labour market, that raising the school-leaving age to 15 would directly create 200,000 adult jobs.¹¹ According to the Ministry of Labour, 215,000 of the 300,000 expected vacancies were likely to be taken up first by 15-18-year-olds, either unemployed or currently unoccupied (130,000), and then by employed adolescents or adults (85,000).¹² Oswald Mosley maintained that a leaving age of 15 would provide employment for 150,000 at a cost of £4½ million a year.¹³

Estimates such as these were based on extremely precarious and often unjustifiable assumptions about the complementarity of adult and juvenile labour, and about the prevailing and expected responsiveness of industry to short-term fluctuations in the supply of labour. They rarely took into account the existing degree of prosperity within particular industries or regions, or the distribution therein of juveniles merely moving between

⁹ R. H. Tawney, *The Possible Cost of Raising the School Leaving Age* (London, 1927), p. 5. Cf. International Association for Social Progress (British Section), Report on "The Raising of the School Age and its Relation to Employment and Unemployment" (London, 1928), pp. 5-10.

¹⁰ *Britain's Industrial Future* (London, 1928), pp. 393-98; *We Can Conquer Unemployment* (London, 1929), p. 50; M. Parkinson, *The Labour Party and the Organization of Secondary Education 1918-65* (London, 1970), p. 24. MacDonald's acceptance of a higher school-leaving age in the 1929 Election manifesto was due in part to "the necessity to put something definite in the programme that might aid the solution of the unemployment problem". D. W. Dean, "Difficulties of a Labour Education Policy: The Failure of the Trevelyan Bill 1929-31", in: *British Journal of Educational Studies*, XVII (1969), p. 288.

¹¹ *Interim Report on the Melchett Turner Conference on Industrial Reorganisation and Industrial Relations* (1929), Ministry of Labour Papers 2/1361. Public Record Office.

¹² *Effects on Unemployment Problem of Raising the School Leaving Age to 15*, 16 July 1929, Ministry of Labour Papers 2/1328.

¹³ House of Commons Debates, 28 May 1930.

jobs (and readily available to replace those who would ultimately be kept at school) and those with personal disabilities likely to make them difficult to place whatever the demand for labour. There were areas in the country in which the general employment position of both juveniles and adults was sufficiently buoyant for there to be but a small reservoir from which substitute labour could be drawn. In other regions the vacancies created by a higher leaving age were likely in total to be negligible compared with the existing pool of surplus unemployed labour. Furthermore, even if a higher leaving age had immediate beneficial effects on the employment of 16- and 17-year-olds in the depressed areas, the effect of holding out hopes of employment in the future for young adults may well have been to anchor both them and their parents more firmly to areas of chronic industrial decline.

The wide variations throughout industry in the skill, habits of work, and the distribution required at a given wage level of workers of different age and sex rendered the idea of a general substitution of one adult for two juniors either wholly inappropriate or virtually impossible to implement. Substituting older workers for younger ones invariably involved increased labour costs, particularly damaging in "unsheltered" and uncompetitive trades. There was no guarantee that given the loss of an entire age group of industrial recruits there would be sufficient elasticity in the wages paid to older groups or enough inducement among employers towards greater mechanized production either to prevent rising costs and disrupted production or to encourage sufficient additional demand for an industry's product to provide compensation. Protagonists of a higher leaving age were generally agreed that vacant 14-15-year-old jobs would be quickly filled by the next immediate age group, who in turn would be replaced by those from the group next above. But at each stage there were likely to be considerable leakages due to the prevailing (though unknown) volume of unemployment among 14-year-olds, because of the loss of jobs which might not be filled if school-leavers were no longer readily available, and perhaps as the result of a more intensive use by employers of youngsters previously working part-time.

II

Such considerations and qualifications rarely figured in the contemporary debate over the industrial aspects of raising the leaving age. Employers were altogether more specific in their objection to the use of the school-leaving age as an employment-creating device. The National Confederation of Employers' Organisations, for example, claimed that a permanent

withdrawal of 14-15-year-olds would only further aggravate the reduction in the number of juveniles available for industry which was destined to occur as a result of the decline in the wartime birth rate (from 23.8 per 1,000 population in England and Wales in 1914 (26.1 in Scotland) to 17.7 per 1,000 in 1918 (20.2 in Scotland)). The problem was expected to be most acute between 1927 and 1933, as the table illustrates.

Number of males and females aged 14-17 years, estimated as likely to be "occupied" (i.e. employed or available for employment), Great Britain 1927-33 (in thousands)

	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933
14	438	439	427	394	365	319	325
15	433	437	436	425	391	363	318
16	647	640	646	647	630	579	537
17	657	644	637	644	643	626	576
Totals	2175	2160	2146	2110	2029	1887	1756

Adapted from Balfour Committee, *Factors in Industrial and Commercial Efficiency* (London, 1927), pp. 150-51. The estimates were derived on the assumption that the ratio of occupied juveniles to total juveniles in the years in question was the same as in 1921.

It was in the employers' interests of course to emphasize the critical importance of juveniles to the general prosperity of large sections of British industry. But the proportion of occupied youngsters aged 14-18 to the total occupied population actually fell in the majority of industries between 1921 and 1931. The 1931 Census of Population showed that among the groups of industries most likely to be affected by a reduction in the supply of juveniles, because they employed considerably more than the average proportion of workers under 18, three were important sheltered industries, — printing, distribution, and personal services — and only one, textiles, was particularly vulnerable to foreign competition. This raised a suspicion within government that because there were wide variations between industries in the use and importance of juvenile labour there was not necessarily any close connection between fluctuations in the supply of young industrial recruits and the availability of vacancies for those presently unemployed.

The Conservative government of the late 'twenties remained practically immune to the economic arguments advanced in support of a higher school-leaving age. It did not believe that the expected shortfall in the supply of juvenile labour would cause industry more than "temporary

inconvenience",¹⁴ and its opposition to extending compulsory education on a national basis hardened noticeably the more appeals were based on the alleged beneficial effects of such a policy on unemployment and industrial revival. The Labour Party, on the other hand, viewed its existing commitment to a higher leaving age as particularly apposite once the crisis of unemployment began to dominate domestic and especially electioneering politics. Political pragmatism encouraged many Labour MPs down to 1929 to reverse their previous opposition to raising the school-leaving age and to defend the policy as an extremely practical source of relief to both juvenile and adult unemployment. Once returned to power, however, in June 1929, the Labour government purposely refrained from discussing the leaving age either purely or even mainly in industrial terms. In part it was afraid of alienating trade-union support in the textile districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire. It soon became clear that legislation was to be pursued on the basis of the educational advantages stemming from a higher leaving age, a reform nevertheless to which worsening unemployment was acknowledged to add a sense of urgency and relevance.¹⁵

In the event the efforts to increase the school-leaving age nationally by legislation came to nothing. Moreover, the relief expected from the decline in the number of youngsters available for employment between 1929 and 1933 as a result of low wartime birth rates was overcome by deepening industrial depression, and there occurred a marked increase in the volume and rate of juvenile unemployment at both national and regional levels down to 1932. The situation was reversed in 1933 as a domestic trade revival coincided with a substantial reduction in the total number of juveniles available for employment.¹⁶ The relief afforded by demographic movements alone could only be short-lived, however, as the rise in birth rates immediately after the First World War¹⁷ promised a substantial increase in the juvenile population in the years down to 1937.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ministry of Labour, Memorandum on the Shortage, Surplus and Redistribution of Juvenile Labour during the years 1928 to 1933. Based on the views of Local Juvenile Employment Committees [Cmd 3327] (1929).

¹⁵ Memorandum by the President of the Board of Education, Raising the School Leaving Age to 15, 24 June 1929, Board of Education Papers 24/1542, Public Record Office; R. Barker, *Education and Politics, 1900-1951* (Oxford, 1972), p. 60.

¹⁶ For further details see Garside, "Juvenile Unemployment and Public Policy", loc. cit.

¹⁷ In England and Wales births per 1,000 population rose from 18.5 in 1919 to 25.5 in 1920, falling to 22.4 in 1921. The equivalent figures for Scotland were 21.7, 28.1 and 25.2.

¹⁸ Ministry of Labour, Memorandum on the Shortage, Surplus and Redistribution of Juvenile Labour in England and Wales During the Years 1930-1938 (1931); Ministry of Labour, National Advisory Council for Juvenile Employment (Scotland), Fifth Report: Supply of, Demand for and Redistribution of Juvenile Labour in Scotland During the Years 1932-1940 (1933).

The existing surpluses of labour in particular industries, especially within the depressed areas, and the uncertainty surrounding the likely strength and direction of revival impulses within the economy encouraged further pressure-group activity in the mid 'thirties in favour of raising the school-leaving age for both industrial and educational reasons. The expected increase in the supply of cheap juvenile labour would, it was alleged, merely increase the scramble for jobs, and ultimately threaten the wage standards and employment prospects of older juveniles and adults.¹⁹ To the demands of the TUC and the Labour Party were added similar appeals from the National Union of Teachers, the Association of Education Committees, the International Labour Office, the Bishop of Durham, and the Archbishops of York and Canterbury.²⁰

In 1935 the number of boys and girls aged 14-18 was expected to exceed the 1933 total by 115,000, in 1936 by 306,000, and in 1937 by 443,000. The number of 14-15-year-olds likely to be withdrawn from employment if the leaving age was raised to 15 was estimated to reach 405,000 in 1935, 398,000 in 1936, and 372,000 in 1937.²¹ Fears as to the consequences of relying purely on market forces to accommodate the expanded workforce were most clearly expressed in regions such as Lancashire, traditionally committed to industries relying on a substantial intake of juvenile labour, but now obviously overmanned and suffering from depression and intense competition. It was suggested in some quarters that the leaving age could at least be raised in this and other depressed regions as a first step towards relieving a potentially damaging situation.²²

The Board of Education remained extremely sceptical of the relief which raising the leaving age to 15 was likely to afford either to the volume and rate of juvenile and adult unemployment or to the mounting cost of unemployment compensation, if only because of the necessary period of preparation involved before the measure could be fully operative. In truth, the National government was almost entirely ignorant of the industrial aspects of the issue, confessing that

¹⁹ R. H. Tawney, *Juvenile Employment and Education* (Oxford, 1934), p. 11: id., "Unemployment and the School-Leaving Age", in: *New Statesman*, 18 November 1933.

²⁰ Labour Party, *Annual Conference Report, 1933*, p. 180; Trades Union Congress, *Annual Reports, 1933-35*; *Times Educational Supplement*, 7 April, 26 May and 16 June 1934; *Times*, 14 November; *Unemployment Among Young Persons*. Report submitted to the Nineteenth Session of the International Labour Conference (Geneva, 1935).

²¹ R. H. Tawney, *The School Leaving Age and Juvenile Unemployment* (London, 1934), pp. 7, 18.

²² J. Jewkes and A. Winterbottom, *Juvenile Unemployment* (London, 1933), pp. 94-107; A. Winterbottom, *An Enquiry into the Employment of Juveniles in Lancashire* (Manchester, 1932).

On the existing material it would not be safe [...] to do more than call attention to the general considerations which may well diminish the value of raising the school age from the employment angle.²³

One such “general consideration” was growing public support for the leaving age to be raised nationally without exemption and for maintenance allowances to be provided for children compulsorily kept at school in order to effect the permanent withdrawal of an entire age group from the labour market. The government estimated in 1935 that such a policy would involve the withdrawal of about 500,000 children in England and Wales, the creation of only 50,000 jobs (given an expected incentive within industry to mechanize production rather than employ older, more expensive labour), and a saving on the Unemployment Fund of an amount at least £1 million short of the necessary cost of maintenance allowances.²⁴

Employers argued strongly in favour of exemptions, however, because demographic trends pointed to a marked decline in the number of juveniles likely to be available for employment in industry during 1937-40. The National Confederation of Employers’ Organisations estimated that if the leaving age was raised to 15 in 1938 the shortfall in the number of school-leavers entering industry would rise from 13,000 in 1938 to 198,000 by 1941.²⁵ The inherent geographical and occupational immobility of juveniles, it argued further, ruled out any substantial relief from labour transference, while the effect of substituting adult for juvenile labour, even if feasible, would result through its reaction on production costs “either in diminished production or increased mechanization, either of which would restrict the existing employment capacity of industry”.²⁶ In the event political expediency exerted its characteristic force. The President of the Board of Education informed the cabinet in 1934 that the popularity of raising the leaving age to 15 with exemptions for beneficial employment

would [...] be among the less vocal *but electorally more important sections of the community*, such as working-class parents and employers of labour, who

²³ Board of Education Papers 24/1537, 9 July 1934, Public Record Office.

²⁴ Note on Possible Saving in Unemployment Benefit due to Raising of the School Leaving Age to 15, without exemptions, April 1935, Board of Education Papers 24/1555; Cabinet Educational Policy Committee, Compulsory Education beyond 14, June 1934, *ibid.*, 24/1549.

²⁵ National Confederation of Employers’ Organisations, The School Leaving Age, Treasury Papers 172/1739, Public Record Office. The estimates were based on the assumption that the number of juvenile posts available in industry remained at its 1934 level of 1,853,000.

²⁶ National Confederation of Employers’ Organisations, School Leaving Age, 25 July 1935, Board of Education Papers 24/1557, Public Record Office.

could quickly voice their disapproval if presented with the alternative policy, by which no exemptions were allowed.²⁷

Raising the leaving age with exemptions was unlikely to have much effect in reducing either juvenile or adult unemployment if previous experience was any guide. In the ten areas where the school age had by 1936 been increased to 15 with exemptions (under the qualifying legislation of 1918 and 1921) exemption rates had varied between 79 and 96 per cent.²⁸ There had never been any firm intention of encouraging the employment of older juveniles by keeping 14-15-years-olds at school; there were nearly as many available for employment in some local areas as there had been before the by-laws were passed.

By the time the 1936 Education Act became law, providing for the raising of the school-leaving age to 15 in September 1939 with exemptions but without maintenance allowances, unemployment was regarded as a far more tangential issue than it had been in previous years. Cyclical recovery, it was accepted, would progressively reduce the jobless total in all but the most sluggish regions, for which special ameliorative policies had already been designed and enacted. The pressure to withhold the youngest juveniles from premature entry to industry had to overcome the employers' demand that the natural demographic check on the size of the labour-force available to industry down to 1940 should not be exacerbated and the government's earnest desire to ensure by legislative enactment that it would not be so.

The 1936 act dashed any hopes of reversing the trend towards early industrial employment. Under the act local authorities were empowered to issue employment certificates to any 14-15-year-old who obtained "beneficial" employment. The government steadfastly refused to list those occupations or conditions of employment which it felt were not beneficial, leaving it to over 300 local authorities to regularize the procedure by judging the nature and probable duration of employment, the wages and hours, and the value to a future career of any training or other advantages afforded by an offer of work. "Employment as cheap labour from the age of 14 [was] thereby contemplated with equanimity as a proper alternative for working-class children whose parents could do no better for them."²⁹

²⁷ Cabinet Educational Policy Committee, *Compulsory Education Beyond 14*, June 1934, *ibid.*, 24/1549 (my italics).

²⁸ G. Bernbaum, *Social Change and the Schools 1918-1944* (London, 1967), pp. 62-63.

²⁹ Simon, *The Politics of Educational Reform*, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

III

There were, in addition to the varying circumstances outlined above, more fundamental reasons why the issue of the school-leaving age failed to make a more significant impact on inter-war discussions about the reduction of unemployment. Treating the school-age question as a branch of the unemployment problem involved a profound misconception of both. Once the raising of the leaving age became an acknowledged feature of the planned reorganization of post-primary education from the mid 'twenties onwards, educationalists adamantly refused to have what they regarded as a significant item of public concern made dependent upon the state of the labour market at any given time. Even when argued on purely educational grounds, it was difficult enough to agree on the scale of the necessary resources and on the academic and organizational changes involved in the sudden imposition of another year of school life. Moreover, if the raising of the school age was to represent a genuine educational advance rather than merely an extension of the "waiting time" which had hitherto characterized the last year of elementary schooling, it could not take effect immediately. But from the point of view of unemployment, there was little merit in any proposal which only began to produce results – and doubtful results at that – in two or three years time.

The dominant cry, especially from Conservative administrations, was that the country could not afford increased educational expenditure, especially if provision had to be made for paying maintenance allowances to those compulsorily kept at school. Parental pressure on children to forego extra schooling in favour of immediate wage earning (especially keen if the male householder was unemployed) and employers' scepticism as to the alleged benefits in terms of greater efficiency and adaptability of an older, more educated if slightly more expensive, workforce kept the issue of extended schooling further at bay, despite persistent and informed efforts to widen the area of reference and debate to include both educational and economic considerations.

Those contemporaries who attempted to reinforce the educational arguments for raising the leaving age by an appeal to the conditions of local employment often failed to appreciate how unconvincing they were. Much was made of the countervailing savings which would be derived from the reduction of juvenile unemployment. But little was known before 1934, even in government circles, of the precise volume or distribution of unemployment among school-leavers or of the proportion of 14-15-year-olds who normally secured employment in industry. Moreover, the larger part of any such savings would have accrued not to the Exchequer but to the

Unemployment Insurance Fund, and would have done little to allay fears that the minimum cost of a higher leaving age, especially if motivated primarily on employment and economic grounds, would far exceed the expected and necessarily long-term benefits to be gained.

Furthermore, official efforts to foster the widespread adoption and use of Juvenile Unemployment (and, later, Instruction) Centres as a means of engaging unemployed youngsters in non-vocational activity, if far from adequate as a final solution to the problem,³⁰ seemed nevertheless to be more appropriate and to offer the prospect of more immediate relief than did reliance on future changes in educational policy, however persuasively the employment aspect was argued. In addition, the significant variations in the regional intensity of juvenile unemployment often made the problem appear transitory and insufficiently serious to warrant any alteration in the period of compulsory education. The plight of youngsters in depressed regions where the tendency was to engage slightly older labour in heavy industries such as coal, iron and steel and shipbuilding, or in textiles areas, where the demand for work by school-leavers outstripped available vacancies and where in each case alternative sources of employment were conspicuously absent, could rarely counteract the apparent irrelevance to those in more prosperous regions of imposing a higher leaving age on spurious economic and social grounds.

The inevitable delay involved in agreeing to any increase in the minimum leaving age and actually implementing the change on a national scale further encouraged the belief that, in so far as juvenile unemployment was concerned, demographic change would, in the time available, effect a "natural" cure of any existing shortages or surpluses in the labour market, obviating the need for corrective action from any other direction. Political commitment, moreover, was forever faltering and uncertain. The Labour Party, once in power from 1929, proved less sympathetic towards canvassing the expected relief to unemployment from raising the leaving age than it had been during its determined search for more widespread public support in the previous five years or so. The Conservative-dominated National government on the other hand, desperate in the mid 'thirties to appear progressive and forward-thinking in major areas of policy, readily embraced some of the arguments for extending compulsory schooling at the same time as it defended the right of employers to cheap juvenile labour and opposed any fundamental educational reform which threatened the prevailing elitism of British society.

³⁰ For further details see Garside, "Juvenile Unemployment and Public Policy".