

S E C R E T

C.P.(45) 140

1ST SEPTEMBER, 1945

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CABINET

RAISING THE SCHOOL LEAVING AGE

Memorandum by the Lord President
of the Council

In accordance with the decision of the Cabinet at its meeting on the 23rd August (C.M.(45) 25th Conclusions, minute 3) I have examined the practical implications of a decision to raise the school leaving age to 15 on 1st April, 1947 in conjunction with the Lord Privy Seal, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Ministers of Labour and National Service, Education, Health and Works. The following I think accurately represents our conclusions.

2. We are satisfied that the raising of the leaving age will be generally regarded as a test of the Government's sincerity and that for political reasons we must stick to the date provided for in the Education Act, 1944 if it is humanly possible to do so.

3. The practical problems involved are twofold:-

- (i) Can the available accommodation in schools be expanded in time to house the increased number of children without an unbearable strain on the building resources available for other parts of the Government's programme?
- (ii) Assuming that the answer to (i) is in the affirmative will there be a sufficient number of trained teachers available?

I. ACCOMMODATION

4. We are satisfied that, given the standards of construction which the Education Departments are prepared to accept, the necessary accommodation can be made available in time without undue strain on our building resources. The amount of labour required is proportionately small (being roughly 15,000 men in the two years August 1946 to August 1948 for this and other parts of the educational programme); and while there may be some difficulty in providing certain materials, such as asbestos sheeting, we think and hope that these can be surmounted.

5. We would, however, emphasise that if the educational and other local authority building programmes are not to be thwarted by lack of organisation, it is essential that not a moment should be lost in extracting skilled technical staff from the Services.

6. Here the position is more difficult. The regulations of the Ministry of Education lay down, as the target to be aimed at, that the number of children on a class roll should not exceed 30 for seniors or 40 for juniors. We are still far from achieving this ideal and the raising of the leaving age in April 1947 will postpone any hope of achieving it for a long time to come. But we think that the continuance of overlarge classes must be accepted as the lesser evil.

7. The other doubtful factor in the problem is the degree to which the teaching profession will be affected by the retirement of married women and over-age teachers now that the war is ended. The Educational Ministers are reasonably confident that the output of teachers under the Emergency Training Scheme will be sufficient for the additional number of children once the age has been raised. But this output will leave no margin to replace any abnormal wastage in the existing number of teachers and if this wastage reached serious proportions, the lack of teachers might leave us no alternative but to postpone the date.

8. As far as England and Wales are concerned we are informed that a special enquiry carried out by the Ministry of Education in November, 1944 showed that there are approximately 45,000 teachers who are either married women or who are over the age of 60 but there are no reliable statistics to show how many of these teachers wish to retire in the near future.

The Cabinet will remember that when the subject was last discussed it was suggested that the abnormal wastage in England and Wales might be as high as 25,000 over the next four years. Since this figure was given, information has come to light which suggests that it was unduly pessimistic and that a considerable proportion of married women and teachers over 60 will continue in the schools for several years to come.

9. When account is also taken of the fact that the Minister of Education intends to make a strong appeal to all teachers to stay on for as long as possible in order to facilitate the early raising of the leaving age, and that there is a financial inducement to the older teachers to remain in the Service for long enough for the full benefit of the recently increased salary scales to be reflected in their pensions, we do not think that the abnormal wastage will amount to more than 10,000 at the most. If it reaches this figure it will represent rather over 5 per cent. of the total body of the teaching profession and, while such a shortage will undoubtedly detract from the standard of education, we do not think that it is sufficient to justify the Government postponing further the date for increasing the leaving age.

10. The Secretary of State for Scotland for his part, is satisfied that the number of teachers likely to be available in Scotland ought to be sufficient to justify the Government in sticking to 1st April, 1947.

11. To sum up, it must be recognised (and we consider that the public should so be warned at an early date) that if we are to raise the leaving age in April 1947 we must be prepared for a time to accept very imperfect conditions. Accommodation will be temporary and makeshift and classes will be larger than could be desired. In spite of these defects, however, we are satisfied that the step can and should be taken.

H. M.

