

Briefing paper: ROSLA

With the exception of Scotland, where SLA was set at 14 as early as 1883 at least in Scottish Education Department policy, the SLA remained at 14 from 1918 (as a result of the Fisher Act, though suspended for a time in the 1920s) until the Butler Act decreed an immediate rise to 15 (implemented in 1947). But there had been calls for SLA of 15 or 16 since before the First World War and also for LEAs to be given the option of setting their own SLA, much as they set their own level of secondary provision. There had also been provision in the Fisher Act for part-time ‘continuation’ classes on a part-time basis to 18, though these were casualties of the Geddes Axe. The second Labour government legislated for ROSLA to 15 but this was cut short by the 1931 crisis, and it was again legislated in 1936 but never implemented. It was widely recognised that SLA of 15 or above would require secondary education for all and this was of course achieved as a result of the Butler Act. It was also expected that a higher SLA would substantially improve social mobility (a proposition interestingly tested over long periods by Heath and Clifford 1996). There was a brief burst of optimism in wartime which led to only a narrow defeat for ROSLA to 16 in the Butler debates, and to the 1947 Advisory Council report in Scotland recommending a universal school-leaving exam at 16, but this dissipated quickly; even Ellen Wilkinson opposed it (favouring continuation schools to 16). The Butler Act in fact did recommend ‘junior colleges’ to 18 – the new name for continuation schools – but I don’t believe many if any were implemented, falling victim to economies just as the continuation schools of the Fisher Act had done.

Debates over ROSLA across the 20th century addressed a number of sensitive questions: was it right for the State to compel people to send older children to school? was it supported by working-class parents or did they prefer not only their liberty but also their enhanced income? should poor families be compensated for SLA by the provision of ‘maintenance allowances’ (already mooted by Fisher)? what are the effects of penning up ‘unacademic’ adolescents in schools in terms of delinquency and value for money? Similarly debates over ROSLA brought into play the usual wide range of motives for providing education: national efficiency, economic growth, civilization, civic training, ‘waste of talent’ (though not so much issues of meritocracy which were affected less by SLA and more by school organization). Debates over ROSLA ought to have triggered discussions of what secondary education was for, but they rarely did. Lewis Silkin was an unusual voice in calling for a rethinking of education as a result of ROSLA (Commons, 19 Jan. 1944). Again, these discussions were confined to debates over school organization – if then (as the relative vacuum of thinking about secondary moderns indicates). As McCulloch argued, debate over ROSLA often displaced debate over the curriculum (McCulloch 1985, 181-2).

Although ROSLA to 15 was legislated in 1944 and implemented in 1947, it is striking how contested it remained for some time thereafter. HMI were sceptical and the Treasury was proposing reversion to 14 as late as 1956 (Woodin et al. 2013, Dean 1995). Even Labour was grimly practical about this. ‘I very much doubt whether higher education can be nourished

by compulsion’, said the Parliamentary Secretary for Education in the Commons (24 Jul. 1951). ‘Imagine the upper forms with children there by compulsion and feeling under a sense of grievance. I do not know of any solution to this problem except the patient missionary work of the schools.’ It is widely accepted that the need to build so many new schools just to achieve ROSLA to 15 in a period of austerity put more than enough pressure on central and local government, though it could be argued that new schools would have been required whether SLA was 15 or 16 and that the real mistake was again not to take the opportunity to rethink what secondary education was for. It was only in the late ‘50s on national efficiency and social justice grounds that universal secondary education became consensual and the aspiration for ROSLA to 16, embedded in the Butler Act, began to creep into political reality. The Crowther Report in 1959 discussed it at length and provided a wide range of reasons to adopt it. Even so, Abrams’ 1957 survey found that 60% of working-class parents were still opposed to ROSLA to 16 (‘Survey of Educational Attitudes’, 1957), though this material would repay a more fine-tuned scrutiny: Abrams himself thought working-class parents were equally divided between indifference, support for ROSLA, and support for ROSLA in principle but a surly conviction that people like them were least likely to benefit. Similar results were obtained by Carter 1962. Crowther agreed that there was insufficient demand pressure to require it immediately, and seemed to repeat the 1951 injunction for more ‘missionary work’ from the top down (Crowther 1959, I, 407-8). Again, only very enlightened commentators made the point that simply extending the SLA without reconsidering what happened in secondary schools would never be popular or successful – another indication that secondary moderns were still widely viewed as necessary holding pens, rather than as schools. I can’t help but mention here the eccentric case of Charles Curran MP who was in favour of ROSLA to 16 because secondary moderns were holding pens: ‘If we want to maintain parental control, if we want to maintain the family unit, I believe it is necessary for social reasons to take children of 15 off the labour market as soon as we can, and keep them at school for a further year. At present, the structure of many working-class families is being swept away by this great tide of teen-age purchasing power.’ (Commons, 21 Mar. 1960).

Both major parties committed to ROSLA to 16 in 1964, and even cheese-parers in the Treasury became less opposed as voluntary staying-on increased and the additional costs that ROSLA would have imposed dropped. I don’t deal here with voluntary staying on, but there is a rich literature on reasons for it that ought to be surveyed separately. There is also the question of how voluntary staying on, and then ROSLA, affected school organization by disrupting experiments in middle schools that had assumed limited transfer at 15. It is interesting that though Crowther in 1959 was still hesitant the Newsom Report in 1963 recommended ROSLA to 16 more or less immediately; but then Newsom was a reconsideration of the purposes of secondary education for the mass of the population, the first real reconsideration since Hadow more than a generation earlier. Parental opinion was also now obviously speaking up for ROSLA; see the 1964 Government Social Survey report on parental opinion prepared for Plowden and the 1968 follow-up (Bynner 1972). So it is

amazing how frequently economy was still used to postpone it. It was only applied in September 1972.

The coincidence of ROSLA to 16 with a series of moral panics about class and youth and education – and possibly with a real crisis of the social order – meant that ROSLA became a focus for debate in the early 1970s even after it was implemented. Right-wing commentators blamed ROSLA for a surge of delinquency, youth crime, truancy, ‘demoralization’, the dumbing-down of exams, and, in concert with comprehensivization, the destruction of quality secondary education as it had been known. Left-wing commentators could even be found to be celebrating the same things. Paul Willis (1977) focused on the impact of ROSLA in magnifying ‘the most aggressive aspects’ of ‘the male white working class counter-school culture’; his study of secondary schools in ‘Hammertown’, like a number of other studies by left-wing sociologists, neatly coincided with the first few years of the new regime (1972-5). After a few years, however, you could also find commentators observing that ROSLA had ultimately instituted a new seriousness about education – evident in the rising take-up of CSEs and O-Levels – and laid the foundations for Thatcherism and the shift to mass participation in higher education; Rutter 1979 was an interesting forerunner, and see also Gray et al. 1983 on Scotland (which documents both the ‘massive classes of outcasts’ contributing to ‘counter-school’ behaviour and also the growth of exam culture, and includes a detailed consideration of truancy), and Burnhill et al. 1988.

The story of ROSLA continues. ROSLA to 18, in a watered-down form requiring education or training, has recently been phased in (to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015). But once ROSLA to 16 was bedded in – by the late 1970s – it never reared its head in quite the same way as it had done repeatedly from the late 19th to the late 20th century. It can’t of course be properly discussed separately from issues of parental attitudes, voluntary staying on and labour-market considerations, so we will need to look to some degree at when adolescents actually leave school (regardless of the SLA) and what they do when they leave, as well as at the immediate effects of changing expectations by raising ROSLA in 1947 and 1972.

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