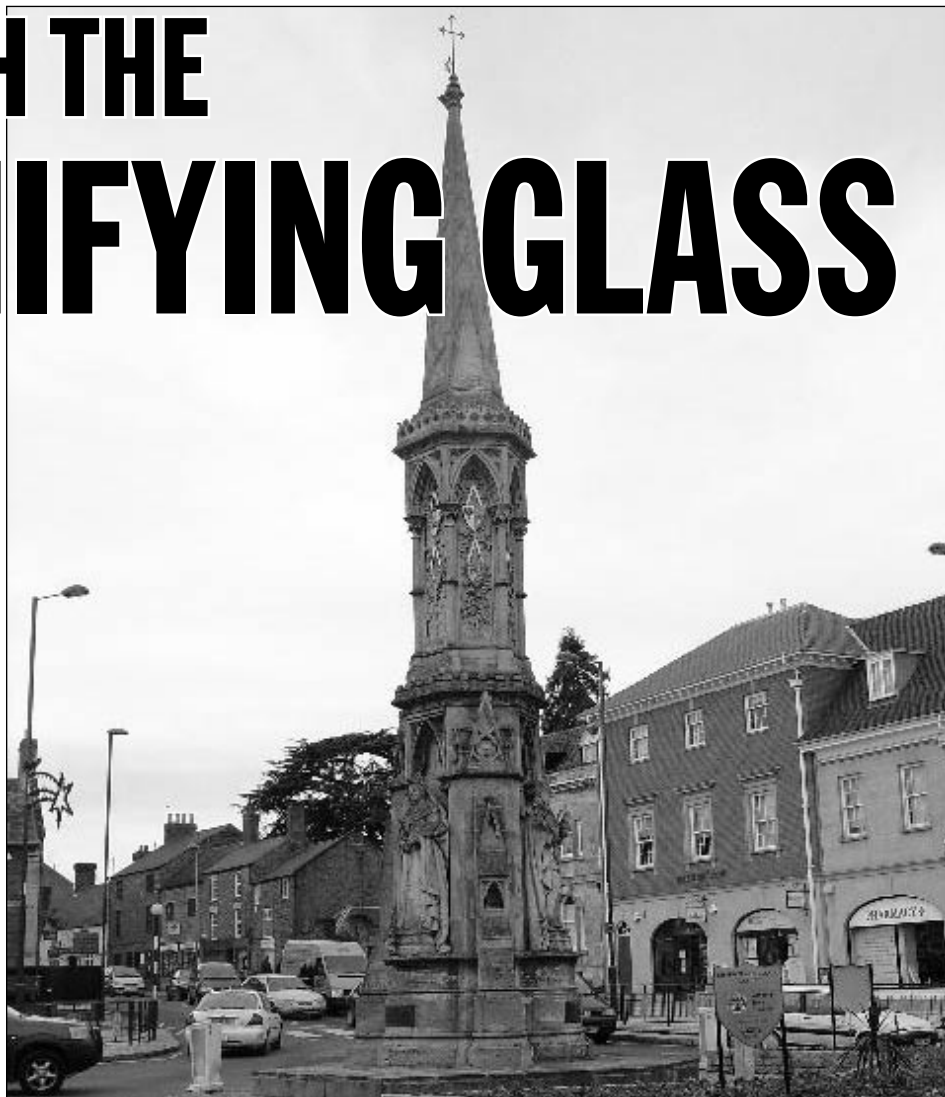


THROUGH THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

Margaret Stacey,
Banbury and the
decline of the Liberal
Party
by **Robert Ingham**



Banbury Cross

The death, in April 2004, of the eminent sociologist, Margaret Stacey, offers an opportunity to draw attention to the lessons for political historians in her seminal work *Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury* (OUP, 1960). This book, written while Stacey was working as a full-time mother, without the benefit of an academic appointment, provided new insights into the dramatic changes within the UK's party system in the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps because it is shelved in the sociology section of university libraries, it has not received due credit from students of politics for its approach to the central question of that period: how did the Liberal Party come to lose its central place in British politics to Labour?

Banbury

Rather than tackle this question head on, Stacey asked what had been the impact on the Oxfordshire town of Banbury of the establishment of a large aluminium plant there in 1933. Prior to the arrival of heavy industry, Banbury had been a sleepy market town which, like the agricultural sector in general, was slowly declining. Now, a period of rapid expansion began: Banbury's population grew by 35 per cent from 1931 to 1951, with newcomers flooding into the new housing estates built on the outskirts of the town.

Stacey focused on the contrast between the traditional social structure of pre-1933 Banbury and the values of the immigrants to the town, and on how the interaction of the two affected political contests in the area. Banbury had long

been influenced by the politics of the great men of the town. From 1859 to 1895 it was represented in Parliament by Sir Bernhard Samuelson, a Liberal and, interestingly in the light of Stacey's analysis of the later period, an immigrant to the town whose agricultural machinery works had caused the town's population to double in the 1880s. After Samuelson's retirement, the North Oxfordshire constituency in which Banbury now lay turned Tory, under the influence of the powerful local Brassey family. It swung Liberal in 1906 but was considered by Pelling to have Tory inclinations by 1910.

In traditional Banbury, everyone had their place in the social structure, and knew what it was. The local gentry and businessmen were clearly at the pinnacle of the town's hierarchy, after which came the artisans and the

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rest. Political affiliation depended primarily on religious factors: Anglicans tended to be Conservative, and Methodists, of whom the town had a significant and active community, were Liberal. Personal relationships, for example connections to particular civic leaders, were also important. Trade unions were barely represented in the town, where firms were mostly small and family-run, and Labour could not gain a foothold.

The new entrants to the town from 1933 had different values and customs to the existing inhabitants and were difficult to place in Banbury's social structure. Nor did they necessarily want to 'know their place' in the town's pecking order. Most significantly, many newcomers were, or became, trade unionists, which enabled the Labour Party to make inroads into Banbury's politics for the first time.

The political contest in Banbury soon came to reflect the upheaval in the town's social structure. Traditional Banburians reacted to the emergence of a strong Labour presence in the town, especially on the borough council, by rallying behind the Conservatives, and thus the Liberals, already the smaller party in the town, were squeezed.

By 1950, politics in Banbury was oriented firmly along class lines, although with undercurrents of the previous alignment still visible. Of the Labour voters, 90 per cent were manual workers, and 58 per cent of manual workers voted Labour; but over half of the working-class heads of households surveyed by Stacey were Conservative. The Tories were strongest in the town's traditional industries and especially with older voters.

Only 8 per cent of Stacey's survey sample were Liberals, half of them being Nonconformists. Four members of the Liberal Association's executive committee also held lay positions in the Nonconformist churches. This was the only factor Stacey found to distinguish Conservative and

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Liberal supporters in the town. Her conclusion was that, by the 1950s, a core of mostly older Conservatives and Liberals, who mixed socially via the Rotary Club and Inner Wheel, constituted the remnants of Banbury's traditional social structure, and that they stood opposed to a younger, socially isolated but more dynamic, body of Labour supporters, based in the non-traditional industries and the housing estates around the town. The main battleground was the borough council, on which the Liberals were no longer represented and therefore looked to the Conservatives to defend their interests.

Support for Stacey?

The post-war period spawned a host of books analysing the political make-up of particular constituencies. Most were based purely on surveys of the electorate and drew few conclusions about how the position they described had been arrived at.

Birch's account of Glossop, however, offers some support for Stacey's argument. Glossop was one of the towns in which Liberal support remained significant into the 1950s. Unlike the situation in Banbury, Birch found a stable community, in which 65 per cent of electors had been born in the town, and evidence that the hierarchical social structure of the nineteenth century, although in decline, was still relevant. The Liberals there too, although more numerous, were predominantly middle-class Nonconformists, uneasy with working with Labour.

Conclusion

Stacey's account of Banbury offers a convincing analysis of how social changes between the wars drove the upheaval in the British party system. Central, although not mentioned by Stacey, was the impact of the first-past-the-post electoral system and the tradition

of parliamentary government on which it was based. Electoral choice in Banbury, and elsewhere, boiled down to being for or against one particular, overriding factor. With the influx of aluminium workers to the town, the key factor changed from the established religion to the town's traditional social structure. In making this choice, little room was afforded for nuances, and third parties were squeezed.

Of course, this leaves many questions unanswered. What happened where the Liberals were the main party and the Conservatives the junior partner in the traditional social structure? (Does Birch's survey of Glossop help answer this question?) What happened in areas where the traditional structure was not overhauled so quickly or where trade unionism did not have such an impact? Could the Liberals have done more to hold on to the support of trade unionists, or did the link between the trade union movement and the Labour Party make it inevitable that union votes would switch away from the Liberals? And what was the social basis for the Liberal revival, Stacey offering no ground for optimism in this direction?

The value of Stacey's work to students of politics lies in its emphasis on local factors, and the importance of detailed local research, if a full understanding of the behaviour of the electorate is to be obtained. While the actions of political leaders may be more exciting subjects of study, and it may be seductive to think in terms of a national swing, local factors are the mainspring of our constituency-based political system. Only with the magnifying glass can we truly discern the meaning of the bigger picture, and Margaret Stacey was both an expert student of political culture at the micro-level, and a talented communicator of her findings.

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