
**POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY IN GREAT BRITAIN**

*by J. A. BANKS*

Political sociology in Great Britain has only a very tenuous place in University Departments of Sociology. It is, of course, true that many sociology teachers in their lecture courses make use of concepts and data which are central to political sociology as this term is understood in the United States; but there are no British schools of political sociology and most of the studies of empirical political behaviour are made by people without a background of formal sociological theory and methodology. British political scientists, as Donald MacRae has put it, "have been so afraid of the name of sociology that some of them have even invented the pompous term 'psephology' to avoid using the phrase 'electoral sociology'". 1) It is, indeed, a characteristic of the British academic scene that political 'scientists' are not to be found primarily in the British Sociological Association, although some of them are members of that body, but in their own separate organisation, the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom, which was established in 1950, just before the B.S.A. was founded. Students, therefore, are well advised to turn to the Journal of the Political Studies Association rather than to the British Journal of Sociology, if they wish to appreciate what is being done in the field of political sociology in Britain today.

*Political Studies* first appeared in 1953 and was designed from the beginning to provide a place for articles on "the internal activities of central governments", on "the behaviour of parliamentarians, party leaders and members, administrators, voters" and on "questions of method and technique in political inquiry". As the editor put it in his introductory note, "it is not possible to say where history, law, sociology, psychology, philosophy and

other 'subjects' stop and the 'subject of politics' begins." The study of political institutions need not, and should not "be confined to the 'machinery of government'; it should extend also to law and, indeed, to all social institutions" 2) The approach, that is to say, was one which might equally have been taken by an orthodox political sociologist; and the journal has continued to follow the line recommended by its editor since that time. It is perhaps of some value for the foreign reader to be informed about the general distinction of approach followed by Political Studies on the one hand and the much older Political Quarterly on the other 3). Political Studies, while not rejecting impressionistic accounts of some aspect or other of the political process, nevertheless tends towards objectivity and precision, whether the subject matter be descriptive or evaluative. Political Quarterly is much more polemical and aims less towards understanding as such and more towards achieving political change, in the tradition of the Fabian Society. Occasionally, it is true, articles appear in it which are of direct value to the sociologist in themselves, but as a general rule its contents are a disappointment, except for the light they throw on the ideologies of the editors and contributors.

The more strictly sociological journals also carry articles from time to time with a politically sociological content or learning. Thus, in 1955 the British Sociological Association held a joint conference with the Political Studies Association and the papers presented on that occasion were published in the June, 1955 issue of the British Journal of Sociology. 4) The Sociological Review has never yet devoted a whole issue to the study of political behaviour, although it has occasionally published articles which may validly be classed as politically sociological. 5) This is also true of broadsheets issued by Political and Economic Planning, an organisation which occasionally undertakes enquiries of a quasi-sociological character.

Donald MacRae's slighting reference to psephology prompts the query: just how far have electoral enquiries been taken in Britain? Each of the General Elections in 1945, 1950, 1951 and

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3) Political Studies is published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, three times a year, at 13s. an issue. Political quarterly is published by Stevens, London, four times a year, at 7s. 6d. an issue.
4) Vol. 6, No. 2. The papers covered voting behaviour in Britain and France, political parties and pressure groups, and various aspects of public opinion. The issue concluded with an article by S. M. Lipset on the American Radical Right, although this was not a paper read at the conference.
5) For further general information on these journals see "venster op Engeland", Sociologische Gids, 2 (Nov. 1955).
1955 have had a volume devoted to them. 6) These take the form of overall descriptive accounts of the political party organisation of elections, a brief newspaper analysis of events leading up to the election and of the treatment of party programmes and candidates during the election, a description of election manifestos, broadcasts, literature, etc. put out by the contesting parties, and a statistical account of the candidates, according to their age, sex, occupational and educational background, party affiliation and so forth, together with details of the number of seats contested and won by the different parties and the proportions of votes cast. None of these studies may be said to be specifically sociological and they are likely to be more useful to some historian of the future as a first approximation of what went on than informative to the sociologically-minded analyst of the nature of the political process in a modern democratic society.

This is also true, with reservations, of a number of less general enquiries conducted during the same period. Thus, in 1950 a volume appeared on the election of that year as it was fought in Glasgow 7), and there have been others, on Greenwich, for example, 8) and on Bristol 9). The main difference of emphasis, interesting to the sociologist, in these enquiries as compared with the general accounts of elections, is the attempt which they make to say something specifically about the social class of the voters, and indeed one whole study has been devoted to this topic. 10) Yet it is not at all clear whether anything of significance has emerged from this narrowing of the topics. Partly, we may say that in general these enquiries demonstrate a family resemblance to Center's classic enquiry into social class in America. If we classify occupations on a rough status scale, we find a rough association with Left and


Right in politics. In English terminology, more working-class than middle and upper-middle class people, as measured by occupation, vote Labour rather than Conservative, more middle and upper-middle than working-class people vote Conservative rather than Labour; but the association is only rough, and much remains to be explained. What is the difference between a Conservative and a Labour working-class voter, for example, or between a Conservative and a Labour, of Liberal, professional? The contemporary sociologist, indeed, is likely to find fault with these studies for their lack of theoretical sophistication. It is of little studies for their lack of theoretical sophistication. It is of little value to continue to think of the approach to electoral sociology in terms of a 'vulgar' Marxist notion of politico-economic class, in which deviations from the expected continue to be thought of as variations from the requirements of strict occupational determinism. "So far", one study had concluded, "sample surveys of electoral behaviour have raised at least as many problems as they have solved 11). This, we should add, is true of all surveys of electoral behaviour, largely because the political scientists involved do not seem to have considered the relationship of their enquiries to the political process generally. What, we might ask, is the theoretical significance of electoral enquiries for political sociology?

It is of some interest in this context to notice that the three most sociologically valuable studies to emerge in England since 1945 have not been devoted to studies of elections but to other aspects of political behaviour. To take these in order of appearance, Robert McKenzie's study of the distribution of power within the Conservative and Labour Parties was an historically oriented enquiry into the possibility of applying Michels' iron law of oligarchy to the British situation. The fact that McKenzie concluded that the 'law of oligarchy' was certainly no 'iron' law 12) is of less importance to us than his demonstration of the influence exerted by the constitutional position of the office of Prime Minister on the internal organisation of the Parties. In spite of their radically different ideological approach to the problems of party organisation and their markedly different historical origins, both parties have 'regressed' to a norm, so that when in power there is little difference between them in the extent to which the party leader is subject to legitimate and effective pressure from the party rank-and-file, although out of power the differences between them become more marked.

McKenzie, we might say, has made a study into the influence of the hierarchical structure of modern society on the organisations which constitute that hierarchy. The Cabinet and Prime Minister system of constitutional organisation is more important than the ideologies of internal organisations of bodies whose rationale for existence is as means whereby individuals may be selected for Cabinet and Prime Ministerial office. The sociologist sees parallels in this in the hierarchical organisation of educational and occupational associations, in which the schools act as the main means whereby their pupils are selected for professional and other posts. Just as the schoolteachers complain that the aims of education are perverted by the demands of future careers, so party members complain that party ideology is perverted by the concentration of ambitious leaders on the need to obtain and maintain the party in power. A close interrelatedness between the two areas of behaviour under enquiry, is precisely what is lacking in studies of elections, even where social class features are included.

In a similar fashion Professor S.E. Finer has been working for some years on the relationship between economic and political power. Beginning with a theoretical discussion of the possible influences operated by the owners of capital on different types of British government over the last generation or so 14), he has made a study of the interest taken by British businessmen in influencing government Departments and of the efforts made by successive governments to impose policy on businessmen. His conclusion in general is that "private enterprise has been rendered noticeably less private" as a result of government intervention and in consequence business associations have tended to turn political 15). His more extended study of the influence of pressure groups on government departments is perhaps too polemical for the tastes of most sociologists, although its serious content should not for that reason be underrated 16), and it should perhaps be read in conjunction with his study of the Federation of British Industries which demonstrates how closely this body has been drawn into becoming part of its policy forming machinery 17).

There is clearly much more to be learned about the extent to which a modern government controls the economic organisa-

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13) See, for example, Banks, O., Parity and prestige in English secondary education, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1956, passim.
tions over which it has formal power, and about the extent to which informally these organisations exert a counter pressure. There is also much more to be said about Finer’s own conclusion that the intermittent pressure of ‘anonymous’ power groups remains within the barriers set for it by a disinterested Civil Service and the Welfare State ideology, but the superiority of his work over that of, say, Brady who took the assertions of the F.B.I. at their face value and saw in the British system of the 1930’s a ‘feudalistic system of cartel controls’ 18), cannot be controverted. What is perhaps now needed is a study of the extent to which social stratification, so important in the recruitment to the civil service 19), may provide an important informal link between businessmen and government officials, while yet not sufficient to result in perversion of the democratic ideology 20).

The third study of some importance which has appeared in recent times has taken a rather different point of departure from the other two. It is, in fact, as much a community study of a small country town of some 18,000 inhabitants, as it is an enquiry into political activity. It emphasizes a point made previously by other political scientists, namely that there is often a sharp dichotomy between the political interests of the local branches of national parties and the policy taken at the centre 21); but it goes further in showing that in the same locality there may be marked differences between the branches of different parties in this respect. There was, for example, greater variation in the kinds of issues which interested Labour Party members than there was amongst Liberals, and Liberals in their turn were less united in their agreement than Conservatives 22). This is a point which those interested in the ideologies of political parties might well carry further, especially insofar as it might have relevance for the distributions between national and local elections. Another aspect of this enquiry, worth following up, is the information it provides on the religious affiliation of industrial workers voting in the 1951 General Election. Anglicans were more likely to vote Conservative than any other party ticket.

20) See, however, the Symposium on the Bank Rate Tribunal in The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1, January, 1959.
Nonconformists, Roman Catholics and people of no religion to vote Labour. The Conservative Party obtained most support amongst Anglicans, especially amongst actual church attenders. The Liberals obtained more support amongst Nonconformists, while the Labour Party’s greatest support came from Roman Catholics 23). There is, of course, no problem of *verzuiling* in Glossup or in England generally as there is in the Netherlands, but this relationship between electoral behaviour and religious affiliation is worthy of further research and some attempt should be made in later enquiries to relate it to the social class membership of the voter. It may be seen that this study of small-town politics, the first of its kind in Britain, is interesting for raising problems for further research into areas so far largely unexplored. Its own positive contribution to political sociology is thus less striking than the work of McKenzie or Finer but it should not be under-estimated for all that.

The work of Seymour Lipset and his colleagues in America has raised for consideration the possibility that the political sociologist might undertake research into other organisations than purely political ones for information on the electoral and other processes of democratic control 24). In Britain there have been no strictly comparable studies although some relevant data for comparison is to be found in three recent enquiries into the electoral procedures of trade unions 25), and there has also been conducted a few preliminary enquiries into the government and control of the democratic co-operative societies 26). Of most interest in this connection is Ostergaard’s study of twoparty and what he calls ‘one-and-a-half’ party systems in co-operative government, since this work was directly inspired by Lipset’s study and is a further contribution to work of that kind. Ostergaard concludes that while a distinctive ideology is an essential condition for the emergence of a party and while it helps to sustain it once it is established, a party system does not depend on the existence of distinct ideologies in a society. „Parties may be ideological associations but they are also, and more importantly, instruments by which men can achieve power and the material and psychic rewards, that accompany the possession of power.

And, as such, they can and do exist with or without a distinctive ideology.” 27).
Political Sociology in Britain, we may say, has at present more to offer in the way of promise than of fulfillment, but some useful work has been done and more is in process. After the initial enthusiasm for 'psephology' students of the political process are now settling down to studying the Conservative workingman and other aspects of political and social stratification which, it is to be hoped, will illuminate some curious features of electoral behaviour. At the same time some of the older British traditions of the statistical analyses of election results are continuing and people like Ross are publishing painstaking analyses of the constitutions of successive parliaments and the cabinet over the last fifty years or so which tell us more about the social class composition of the British government than all the 'field' work of the past fifteen years put together 28). Much of the research has been published as articles in journals and it is indeed a pity that no reader of political sociology in Britain has been compiled to make it available in a handier form.


MEDEDELINGEN

Studiebeurs.
Door een particulier wordt een bedrag beschikbaar gesteld voor een sociologische publikatie over de wereldkrisis van de jaren dertig. Ook promovendi komen hiervoor in aanmerking. Inlichtingen bij Dr. G. J. Kruijer, Michelangelostraat 28, Amsterdam-Zuid.

Adreswijziging.
Uit bovenstaande mededelingen blijkt, dat het adres van de voorzitter der redactie is gewijzigd. Zijn telefoonnummer is hetzelfde gebleven.