

REVIEWS

Of Liberals and Liberalism

Duncan Brack (ed.), *The Dictionary of Liberal Quotations*

(Biteback Publishing, 2013)

Reviewed by **Sam Barratt**

PUBLISHED BY BITEBACK in paperback, this second edition of *The Dictionary of Liberal Quotations* has seen a sizeable overhaul from the original (1999) volume, with around a fifth of the book being new material. The volume itself stands at some just over 400 pages and is part of Biteback's trilogy of political dictionaries which also encompasses a *Dictionary of Conservative Quotations* and a *Dictionary of Labour Quotations*.

Since the 1999 offering, the Liberal Democrats have entered government and amongst more recent examples of quotations from party figures such as Paddy Ashdown, Shirley Williams and an expanded selection for Menzies Campbell, new additions include Nick Clegg, Kirsty Williams and Tim Farron. There are also new additions beyond the Liberal Democrats: Barack Obama has been included, Nelson Mandela's section extended and there is also a nice selection from Aung San Suu Kyi.

Looking back at Tony Greaves' review of the 1999 edition (*Journal of Liberal History* 26, spring 2000), he will be pleased to see the removal of a quotation from *Mein Kampf*, along with several others. As Duncan Brack notes in his introduction, the new edition has sought to remove quotations which he describes as 'generic references and vaguely relevant concepts' in favour of more from liberals, Liberals and Liberal Democrats – though there are a number of offerings from Social Democrats too. Sections of the book feel richer for this approach.

Brack also notes the dual aim of the book: to provide quotes from significant figures and to include interesting quotes about liberalism and its associated themes. It is a balance that is struck reasonably well, though at times one does wonder whether a companion thematic chapter may convey this latter

aim more effectively – though this would break with the form of a dictionary!

This is, it should be conceded, nit-picking. Most sections in the book feel well balanced, and while some sections are noticeably substantial, the quality of quotes included seldom wanes. Whilst I suspect personal preference would see some readers happily abridge some areas, the editors have afforded similar space to comparable figures for the most part, something I imagine to be a difficult task.

What is especially striking about this collection is the breadth of figures quoted, from the thirteenth-century Persian poet Sa'di – 'The hand of liberality is stronger than the arm of power' – through to Voltaire – 'I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it' – and on to twentieth-century British Liberals such as Jo Grimond – 'You must have some touch of idealism in politics' – the collection, though more focussed than the previous edition, still draws from a wide pool of literature and speakers.

Some quotes have, as with many things, aged especially well; Paddy Ashdown's comments to the Liberal Democrats' 1999 conference being one such example: 'In Jo Grimond's time we used to have a slogan: "We hate the Tories. But we distrust the state." It's not a bad one for the years ahead.'

In terms of utility, the index, as Greaves noted with the first edition, could be improved with individual authors and themes being included in one list; however, with a book of this style this is unlikely to trouble many.

This does very much feel like a book that is to be used as much as it is enjoyed. While the content will of course appeal to those with an interest in liberalism, the

scope of authors means that those who wish to craft speeches should be able to find suitable quotations to pepper their prose, whatever their style may be. Equally, those looking for suitably spiked retorts could do a lot worse than to dwell around the pages dedicated to Violet Bonham-Carter.

I suspect that some copies will have inevitably have some sections more thumbed than others – which is probably unavoidable in a book that includes Adam Smith and Karl Marx, which is in part the enjoyment in reading. Alongside quotations that some readers will find themselves reciting before they have got beyond the first word are more unusual examples from authors whose identification relies on the accompanying biographical summary.

Whether it is something that is dipped in and out of, or heavily annotated and 'borrowed from' when someone else has encapsulated an idea in words that just resonate that little bit more, it is a book that anyone with an interest in liberalism and liberal history will find value in.

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