

## **REVIEW: GUIDE TO SCOTTISH POLITICS**

*Ailsa Henderson*

Ann Packard (ed.), **Ps and Qs: People, Perspectives, Questions and Quotations**, Edinburgh, 2000, ISBN 0953674916, 196 pages, £15.

Ann Packard's **Ps and Qs** is intended as a resource guide for those interested in Scottish politics. As the title indicates, the work is divided into four sections, offering an assortment of facts and a retrospective look at the first year of the parliament. According to the introduction by Andrew Cubie the work has been compiled by those who 'wish the Parliament well'.

The first section, on people, provides a list of MSPs by their region of representation, party and position. Additional reference material such as cabinet, committee and cross-party group membership, and addresses for local authorities, MEPs, the Civic Forum and Scotland's lord lieutenants are also provided. Westminster MPs are listed by party, twice, although no contact information is provided for the constituency offices. The first section of the book thus resembles parliamentary companions published by Dod's or PMS in its provision of contact information and useful lists.

The second section, on perspectives, includes 46 short opinion pieces on various aspects of Scottish politics and society. The list of those included extends beyond the usual suspects although members of Scotland's political classes are well-represented. Canon Kenyon Wright, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, SCVO head Lucy McTernan and former Centre for Scottish Public Policy Director Gerry Hassan each provide one or two pieces on exclusion or the performance of the Parliament in its first year. The selection of individuals befits a publication that has received funding and support from the voluntary sector. The section also repeats what has become a familiar sight in the bookstores of Scotland, a collection of opinion pieces on the Scottish political system. The section itself contains a plug for one such publication and for a

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previous work by the editor. The purpose of the section is not entirely clear. Great care has been taken to emphasise that the views expressed are those of the individuals rather than the various institutions they work for. If this is the case it is not clear why individuals without affiliation, or jobs in Scotland's political affairs, were not included. In addition, the editorial team appears uncommitted to the purpose of the section. One piece on children's rights contains a footnote from the editor, mentioning a fund for children that the editor believes individuals should know about. The information, which 'is not referred to above, but deserves a mention' is interesting, but would have been more appropriate on a contacts or resource page rather than as an addendum to someone else's opinion piece.

A table on parliamentary questions follows the perspectives section. The data was gathered by a 3rd year Napier student from the early days of the Parliament. We are treated to a half page explanation on what the student has learned about himself and about the value of teamwork. Questions are listed according to theme and include information on who posed, and who responded to, the question. Although not indicated in the table, only those questions asked before 4 May 2000, appear to be indexed. While the date of publication obviously affected the questions that could be included, it would have been useful to indicate that this list represents either all the questions up to a certain date, or only a selection of questions.

The fourth section contains a list of quotations gathered from newspapers, plenary debates and informal vox pops undertaken by the editors. The quotations themselves are organised thematically and provide an insight into the minds of Scotland's political class. The contributions from plenary debates properly represent the vibrant and entertaining intellectual sparring that has been occurring within the chamber of the Scottish Parliament. Our politicians, some of them anyway, appear to have properly developed senses of humour and wit that sometimes erupt in their speeches. It is unlikely that the average Scot reads the official proceedings of the Scottish Parliament and so it is encouraging to note the inclusion of several fine lines in this book.

It would have been possible to fill the entire 60 pages allotted for the section with information from our representatives. It is in the deviation from quotations about political life, to sometimes self-serving and self-referential contributions, that this section falls apart. Some of the quotations are funny, some are silly, some profound, but some are entirely inappropriate. One theme, 'book titles', treats us to the musings of the editorial team. No quotes. Just book titles they think could be seen to have something to do with Scottish politics (eg **Great Expectations**, **The Beautiful and the Damned**). The section also includes four quotations from various sources praising a

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previous book by the editor. The theme? The title of her previous book. The selection criteria for the inclusion of quotations in this section appear entirely unclear. Take for example, a quotation by Giles Weaver, Chairman, Murray Johnstone Ltd, Glasgow: under the heading of culture, Weaver's words are 'one of the pleasures of managing a successful business is the ability created to contribute, at least financially, to Scotland's culture. In our case we have been supporting the National Galleries of Scotland in 2000'. Why are we treated to the PR efforts of a Glasgow businessman? The theme entitled Daily Record contains no quotations at all but some paraphrased comments and sources for the paper, the last of which reads 'Find, in your library, and read, the 13.08.99 editorial re Prisons'. Perhaps the article would have been better placed in the section on perspectives. A quotation it is not. We are also treated to quotes gathered by the editor in her dealings with Scotland's great and the good. Some of the vox pop quotations would have better served the publication as page footers in place of Abraham Lincoln quotations. Their inclusion in the quotations section sits uneasily with the plenary sections. Lastly, James Barrie's 1908 quotation 'There are few more impressive sights in the world than a Scotsman on the make' is included. In a section that is supposed to include comments from the first year of the parliament, this is entirely out of place.

The section leads to an assortment of additional reference material. Photographs of MSPs, a code of conduct for members of the Association of Scottish Public Affairs, the Neil Committee's seven principles of public life, and contact details for social organisations from abortion/pregnancy to zoos complete the publication. The material returns to the form favoured by the first section, offering useful and relevant information for those whose work or interest requires that they know how to contact, address and appeal to social and political activists. The publication appears to have been divided in two, in part because the first section contains information on MSPs, and the very last begins with photographs of our representatives. The opinion pieces and quotations in the middle seem out of place.

Throughout the publication, quotations from such diverse sources as Benjamin Disraeli, Abraham Lincoln, and 'a member of Ps and Qs team' adorn the pages. The quotes themselves are standard 'strive for excellence' fare, although as applicable to work in general as they are to Scottish politics. The collection also contains hand drawings of sheep and mobile phones, as well as reminders that we should 'leave accessible car park spaces for disabled people'. The result is an uneasy blend of critical information and odds and ends gathered by the research team. Scottish politics may require a reference work, and the Scottish Parliament in particular would benefit from a compilation of information such as Dod's which provides contact information

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and facts to aid participation in political life. There is a wealth of data that has been overlooked. Information on the publicly available register of interests would have been extremely useful. The list of MSPs who write columns for newspapers is as interesting as some of the quotations included in the work. The present conveners of the committees, although admittedly subject to change, also deserved to be included. The development of a code of conduct for MSPs, a task that was rather controversial, surely warrants as much attention as the code of conduct for ASPA. Why are the Neil Committee's seven principles of public life included and the four principles of the Scottish Consultative Steering Group left out? In place of some of the quotations, diagrams, blank pages, photographs, footers or perspective pieces, the work could have provided constituency and list election results – complete with size of majority and turnout – employment information for the MSPs, information on those who were serving political mandates at the time of election, and e-mail addresses for MSPs. On the whole, the book does provide some interesting information although to classify it as an essential resource grossly inflates its importance. Given that much of the information contained in the work may be located for free on the Scottish Parliament website, the decision to spend £15 for **Ps and Qs** rests on how one views vox pop quotes from university students across Scotland, reviews of the author's previous publications, and references to apparently interesting articles in the **Daily Record**.

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