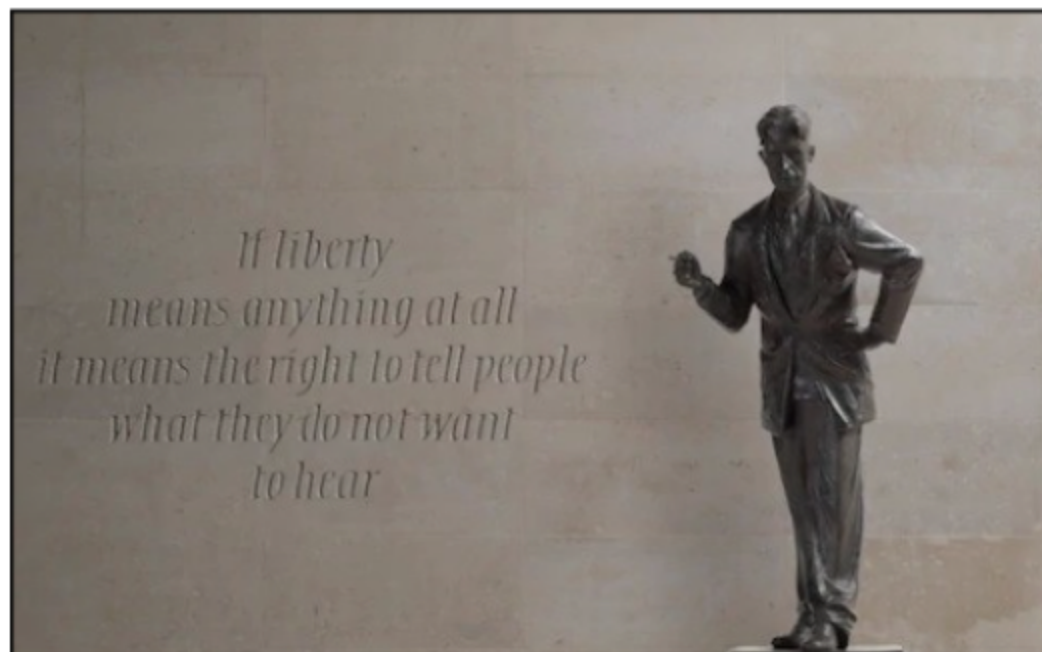


The “Quote... Unquote” NEWSLETTER

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BY GEORGE!

Last November the BBC finally got round to celebrating one of its most celebrated employees by putting up a statue to him in the entrance to New Broadcasting House in London. Never mind that George Orwell only remained as a producer in the obscure BBC Eastern Service for two years during the war. Never mind either that he once described the BBC as having an, **‘atmosphere something halfway between a girls’ school and a lunatic asylum’** (diary entry for 14 March 1942). If any broadcasting person deserves a statue (and I do not think there is any other, if you leave out Eric Morecambe’s in Morecambe), then Orwell absolutely deserves it. Good too that it is enhanced by a quotation: **‘If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.’**



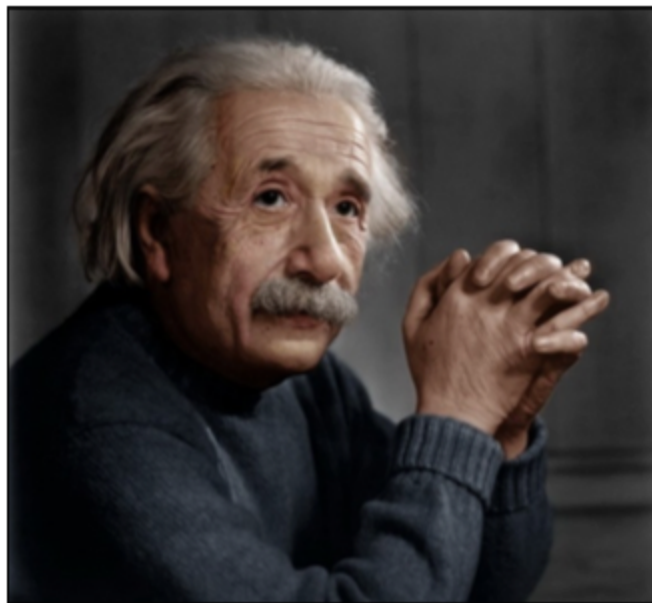
This comes from the original preface to *Animal Farm* (1945) but was not included in the first edition of that novel and only saw the light of day when it was found among Orwell’s papers and published in 1972.

ALBERTIAN DRIFT?

Andrew Robinson is the author of some 25 books, many on scientific subjects and including *Einstein: A Hundred Years of Relativity* (2015). He asked for my views on Einstein and the concept of Churchillian Drift. I replied: 'If I have a take on Einstein quotation, it is that there is not anything really comparable to Churchillian Drift in it. On the whole, I don't think that people unload on to Einstein things that should really be credited to others, because of who he is. The problem lies in finding

solid sources for things that he might very well have said. Rather as with Mark Twain, there is such a mass of material coming from this 'quotation generator' [as Andrew calls him], that sometimes it is impossible to state definitively that he said any of the things ascribed to him.'

Andrew showed me an article he wrote for the Californian website PrimeMind (published on Einstein's birthday in 2016) and he has kindly allowed me to reproduce this abridged version:



'Einstein, whose greatest achievement was his general theory of relativity, is by far the most quoted scientific figure who has ever lived. He is ahead not only of fellow scientists Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, and Stephen Hawking but also of his non-scientific near-contemporaries Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, and George Orwell, if we judge simply by the number of entries on Wikiquote (Currently [2017], Newton and Churchill have about 30 and 35 pages; Einstein has 65). But how to distinguish the real from the paste?

The Ultimate Quotable Einstein, published by Princeton University Press, the publisher of Albert Einstein's papers, is now in its fourth edition and still expanding, with a separate section on misattribution. As the book's editor remarks: "There appears to be a bottomless pit of quotable gems to be mined from Einstein's enormous archives." Why this fascination with Einstein quotation? After all, few of us have deep understanding of his scientific achievements. Yet almost everyone can feel his unique appeal. Clearly, Einstein's turbulent later life and courageous stands – not to mention his personal eccentricities, such as his wild hair and lack of socks – intrigue many people who are bemused by general relativity. All these factors underlie the reach of his undoubtedly exceptional way with words in both writing and press interviews – mostly in his native German but sometimes in English too.

'Unsurprisingly, Einstein is quoted as an authority on science. For example: **"The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible."** He is also quoted on almost every other aspect of human behaviour, such as intelligence, education, religion, politics, marriage, and music-making. On intelligence we get: **"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity."** On religion: **"God does not play dice."** On politics: **"One must divide one's time between politics and equations. But our equations are much more important to me, because politics is for the present, while our equations are for eternity."** On marriage: **"Men marry women with the hope they will never change. Women marry men with the hope they will change. Invariably they are both disappointed."** And on life in general, a comment that recently filled an entire page of an in-house advertisement in one of the world's two leading science journals *Nature*, **"Things should be made as simple as possible but not any simpler."**

'But wait a minute. Did Einstein definitely say or write all of these frequently quoted remarks? Regarding the first quotation, Einstein actually wrote (in a U.S. science journal in 1936): "The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility ... The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle." His comment was then popularly rephrased as above. The quip about intelligence is a misattribution that seems to have been created from a similar remark by Gustave Flaubert: "Human stupidity is infinite," written in 1880. The comment on God and chance is certainly genuine; it first appeared (in a slightly different form) in a letter written by Einstein to physicist Max Born in 1926, in which he repudiated the new quantum-mechanical notion of the universe as ruled by probability. The comparison of politics with mathematics comes from the recollection of a well-known mathematician, Ernst Straus, who collaborated with Einstein. The jaundiced view of marriage has no Einstein source, though it does chime with Einstein's letter to the family of his lifelong friend, Michele Besso, who died less than a month before Einstein: "What I admired most in him as a human being is that he managed to live for so many years not only in peace but also in lasting harmony with a woman – an undertaking in which I twice failed rather miserably."

'As for the much-quoted *aperçu* about simplicity, which first appeared in *Reader's Digest* in 1977, a thorough search by Einstein scholars has failed to locate an exact Einstein source. "Most likely, the quotation is a paraphrase of some of Einstein's

other statements about simplicity," notes *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein*. He is also alleged to have said: "The hardest thing in the world to understand is income taxes." The comment is even attributed to Einstein on the website of the Internal Revenue Service. The original source is Einstein's friend, the otherwise unremarkable Leo Mattersdorf, who apparently advised Einstein on his U.S. tax returns for many years.

'Evidently, the world has a need for Einstein's unique anti-authority authority. In 1901, a 22-year-old, starving, utterly unknown, Albert wrote in a letter to his future wife, Mileva, of "impudence – my guardian angel." It eventually guided him to his general theory of relativity, a century ago this year, that overturned the Newtonian conception of the universe. By 1930, when Einstein had become world famous, he wrote an aphorism for a friend that is my personal favourite among Einstein quotations: **"To punish me for my contempt of authority, Fate has made me an authority myself."**