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First encounter with Governor Patten and the
ensuing struggle to preserve the Basic Law

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

My first face-to-face encounter with Governor Chris Patten took place soon after his arrival in Hong Kong in July 1992. For some reason or other, I did not record that date in my diary. It was also my last tête-à-tête with him because obviously I did not fit in with the political plans he had already decided. In fact it is believed that his plans were submitted to Her Majesty the Queen and signed by her before they were put to the Legislative Council in 1994.

During that interview in July, the Governor asked what would be my reaction if the two Municipal Councils and the 19 District Boards were all to be directly elected. I advised him that he had best consult the Regional Council and the District Boards since I had no right to represent them, but that as the representative of the other municipal council, the Urban Council, I could say with assurance that they preferred a gradual phasing out of the appointed members at future elections as their expertise was not easy to replace.

My reply obviously did not please the Governor and I was soon ushered from this interview at Government House. Later, I myself approached the Regional Council and the 19 District Boards to seek their views and learned that the Regional Council and all but one of the District Boards were in agreement with the stand of the Urban Council, not to dismiss the appointed members speedily. I informed the Governor of my findings, but the gentleman was not for turning. Lack of expertise among elected members was the main reason for this stand, but in addition, the sudden leap into democratic systems in other countries had shown the danger of destabilisation following unplanned so-called democratic changes. In every case it was the common people who suffered from such changes.

While Chris Patten has vociferously maintained that the public must be consulted, he has in all matters held consultation but ignored the results. Insider remarks from members of his Executive Council indicate that, unlike all previous Governors, he accepted no views but his own and those of his unofficial foreign advisers employed personally by him to organise his publicity and control the media. A colonial dictatorship indeed! He hid also behind the views of the so-called "Democrat Party" whose self-interest happened to coincide with his own agenda, and that agenda was undoubtedly to win Western approval as a fighter for democracy and to cover up for Britain's past intransigence in rejecting democracy for Hong Kong. He succeeded insofar as he made himself world-famous, and Britain gained a reputation for offering democracy to Hong Kong which for over a hundred and fifty years it had denied to the people here. The truth is that democracy was never contemplated for Hong Kong until the Joint Declaration of 1984 indicated that China was prepared to introduce an elected system in 1997.

I attempted repeatedly to bring the Governor and the British Government back to the Basic Law which had accepted input from hundreds

of Hong Kong residents and lawmakers. In September 1992, a month before the Governor put his devastating package before the October opening of the Legislative Council, 1992, I wrote to advise him that in a meeting with Mr. LU Ping in Beijing, a group of legislators had been clearly told that if the 1995 elections did not coincide with the Basic Law, China would have no choice but to revert to the Basic Law after 30 June 1997. Patten was not prepared to listen. Nor did he have the courtesy to meet the Chinese leaders after he became Governor and before he gave his own version of what the Basic Law should have been and how to interpret it.

On a constitutional point the Governor of Hong Kong is required by the Letters Patent and the Royal Instructions to consult the Executive Council before making any policy changes. Slick as he most certainly is, he escaped that requirement by "accepting the resignations" of all but the leader of his Executive Council on the morning just before his policy address, and appointing a new Executive Council immediately after making that speech. Most of the new members were persons willing to support his views. Yet the press did not point out this enormous constitutional trick, nor did the British Government seem to notice it when he excused himself this obligation by saying that at the time there was no Executive Council to consult.

Five years of political nightmares followed that speech. Hong Kong people were rent apart because the propaganda of Patten and his allies turned the big guns on everyone who dared to oppose Patten, and Patten went for the hearts of the unsuspecting people by offering social improvements that he had no intention of carrying out. The housing situation has greatly worsened, and the unemployment rate has risen during his regime. But his silvery tongue has time after time deceived the people, the same tongue that he has used to lash Chinese officials or local people who saw through his tricks. Moreover, he has controlled the press and had himself declared the most popular Governor ever, a refrain willingly taken up by the western press bent on demonising all socialist countries and their leaders.

The letters I now print indicate that I have done my utmost to bring my own country to realise the damage this Governor was doing. I have never denigrated my own country abroad, as local Chinese have denigrated and even attempted to destabilise their country. I have constantly appealed to what I had hoped was our British sense of Justice. And in that I have become totally disillusioned. My country has not acted honourably and I have therefore thrown in my lot with the local people, especially those who shared my hope of a peaceful transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China. I have tried being polite to the British Government. I have tried being rude. My conclusion is that almost all Members of Parliament are near or totally ignorant of their former colony, and follow like sheep what British or even United States politicians tell them.

In spite of all, thanks to the pragmatic people of Hong Kong, thanks to the civil service that remained loyal to the people, thanks to China's patience, and thanks to Hong Kong's new leaders, the transfer of power eventually went smoothly and without the turmoil promised by the radical anti-China elements.

With leaders like Tung Chee Hwa, Elsie Leung Oi-sie and others upholding justice and the rule of law, Hong Kong has a bright future.

Eric Tu