Hong Kong's Last Governor

As soon as the British elections of 1992 were over, with results surprising everyone, not least the winning Conservative Party, it was announced that failed candidate Chris Patten was to be Hong Kong's next and last Governor. He had worked hard, we were told, for the success of the Conservative election campaign to the neglect of his own constituency and had lost his own seat. The governorship of Hong Kong was to be the thank-you gift of the party for the hard work of the candidate who had been rejected by the Bath electorate in Britain.

Many people in Hong Kong objected to having a reject-politician thrust upon them by his friend, British Prime Minister John Major. Personally I am not convinced that this was not nepotism. Apparently Martin Lee had no such qualms, either about having a London-appointed Governor or one who had failed in Britain. He and the Deputy Chairman of his party just made a beeline for Britain, and for the first time in Hong Kong's political history, a Hong Kong political party was given an interview with the Prime Minister and his friend Patten at 10 Downing Street. What went on in that meeting is anyone's guess: the party that demands openness is not known to be open itself.

One can only conjecture from what followed that it was probably in this meeting that the Patten political package was cooked up. If that was the case it would be highly unconstitutional because Hong Kong has no ruling party, and if Martin Lee represents anyone it is, and was, only about 10 percent of the potential electorate.

Soon after his being nominated Governor, I spoke to two visiting Members of Parliament and asked what kind of person Patten was. They told me that he was clever, very clever. By their manner of speaking I assumed that they meant something more than just clever, and when questioned one of them admitted that he meant "trickily clever". Asked then why he had lost his own seat, they volunteered the information that Patten had supported his constituents in opposing the poll tax which had led to riots and had eventually had to be scrapped, and that his constituents had then discovered that he was at the same time writing Mrs. Thatcher's speeches supporting the poll tax. Of course I have no way of confirming what I was told but guess he must have done something to lose what had always been a "safe" seat. However, I think we in Hong Kong would recognise the story as being a possibility, since Patten seems to enjoy making convincing speeches, without being necessarily convinced of the cause that he is propagating.

I watched the television report after the announcement of his appointment as Governor. Hong Kong reporters had rushed to London to ask him questions. I saw how rudely he treated them: he waved them away when he alighted from his car. At that time he seemed most unlike the person we later learned was an avid publicity seeker, taking the press with him everywhere, even when he bought a new pair of shoes or bought something from a trader in a Hong Kong market.

One point that appears to have evaded the press notice was that during the British elections of 1992 he was sued for libel for alleging that two or three candidates of the Labour Party were either supported or had received donations from Russian
Communists. A short article did appear in a Hong Kong newspaper that he had had to pay compensation but the affair appears to have been played down. It would be interesting to hear the whole story.

A more clear picture, based on facts given by Mr. Patten himself appeared in the 'Sunday Morning Post'. He had been interviewed by one of their reporters and told the following story. In his school and college days Chris Patten according to the report which has never been challenged, had shown no interest in politics but was interested in playacting. In one play which had shocked the school authorities in a Shrewsbury school, Patten, who had been at the centre of the uproar, was said to have been "triumphant through the brouhaha". A school friend said of him, "He was extremely funny. It was real music hall stuff....He had very definite talent. He was a great mimic and a good clown." No doubt there are many in Hong Kong, in China and in Britain who would have wished he had exercised his talent in the "real music hall stuff". Instead, he chose to try his hand at being the "triumphant star" in the brauhaha of his five years' reign of error in Hong Kong.

To continue the brief life story in the Sunday Morning Post, in 1965 Patten, having concluded his studies, was awarded a scholarship on a cultural project in the United States. There he met the Mayor of New York, Mayor Lindsay, who was preparing for his next election against an opponent named Buckley. Finding that Patten could mimic the English accent of Buckley brilliantly, Lindsay asked Patten to head his "Dirty Tricks, Stop Buckley Campaign". Patten's efforts succeeded, and from that time he was hooked on political campaigns. His colleague said of him, "He just thought politics was far more fun than anything he had done before". Apparently fun, not people, loomed large on his political horizon.

Arriving back in Britain, Patten is reported to have sent letters immediately to the two main parties, the Conservative and the Labour Party, who at that time had totally different philosophies. He had decided to take the first offer, and as that came from the Conservative Party, he became a Conservative. That sounds like the Vicar of Bray mentality - the mentality of the person who can take either side in religion or politics, whichever is to his advantage! It certainly must leave one querying what principles entered into his decisions on other matters.

Questioned on Patten's political activities in Hong Kong, his former tutor, Maurice Keen, is reported to have replied: "He does not think so much of what the people of Hong Kong want as what they need in their present situation. This is not necessarily what the financial establishment might like if they are to survive as they are. He (Patten) is then left to answer the difficult question of whether moving in that direction is not something we should have started some time ago, and whether or not it may now be too late." Wisely spoken, but apparently consequences for what he did never entered into the reckoning of Hong Kong's last Governor. Five years of political hell were apparently not too high a price for the Hong Kong people to pay in order to raise worldwide the profile of Patten and his Hong Kong allies, even though the end result was a slowdown
in the democratic process, and resulted in the necessity to set up an interim legislature in 1997. Inestimable damage was also done to Hong Kong's image and her economy because the media propagated only one side of the story, thanks to the brilliant propaganda of this very music hall talent, a talent that neither China nor Patten's opponents in Hong Kong could equal in wile.

When Chris Patten arrived in Hong Kong in July 1992, three months before he was to make his policy address, he made a show of seeking opinions from many people, including myself, probably because I was an elected member of the Urban Council and represented that body on the Legislative Council. I had been directly elected in my geographical constituency since 1963, invariably with the highest vote. My democratic credentials were known to everyone. Somehow, as he questioned me that day, I felt like a small child who has been called before the headmaster to answer questions, but I felt none of the rapport that I had experienced with Sir David Wilson and other former Governors. It was like being under interrogation or investigation. The main thing he wanted to know was how I would react if the two Municipal Councils and all the District Boards were to be directly elected. At that time they consisted of directly elected members and appointees. In replying, I explained that I had no authority to speak for the Regional Council or the District Boards, and suggested that it would be better to approach them directly. I did, however, have the right and the responsibility to speak for the Urban Council, being its representative. In fact we had already discussed the question thoroughly. At that time there were fifteen directly elected members on the Urban Council, fifteen appointed for their special expertise, and ten seats were occupied by members elected indirectly from District Boards. The system was working well and input by the appointed members was appreciated because they had the expertise to complement the more politically oriented elected members. We had agreed unanimously that the appointed members could be phased out gradually five at each election, in the hope that some of them or other experts would stand for election. In Hong Kong, people with expertise are usually too busy to take time out of their business to take part in electioneering, but they will spare time to give advice at meetings if appointed. In fact, if the records are checked, I think their attendance at meetings would be found to be more reliable than a few elected members, who seemed to spend more time preparing for the next election than in service to those who had elected them, though that is not true of all.

I explained this stand to the Governor at that first interview, but I felt he was displeased and did not want to hear that answer; soon after I was shown the door of Government House, and was never again invited in that capacity. I was soon to learn that this Governor would listen only to those who shared his own opinions. Soon after this interview, I contacted the Regional Council and District Board chairmen to seek their views on the matter, and although I had no official authority to ask them, they replied that the Regional Council and all but one of the District Boards held the same views as the Urban Council. The one which disagreed was chaired by a member of Martin Lee's party, so one would not expect him to agree. I informed the Governor of my findings, but I could have saved myself the trouble of doing so because his
mind had already been made up. I once met an old school friend when he was visiting Hong Kong and asked him what kind of person he had found the Governor to be. He said that while Chris Patten was an amiable person he had one big fault: once he had made up his mind on anything, nothing would change it. The Chinese term for such a person translates into "stiff necked", as in English. In that he must have found the perfect soul-mate in Martin Lee, though two of that kind would never agree unless they happened to hold the same opinions in the first place. In this case they did. Patten, who had once played with the idea of joining the Labour Party (if it had answered his application for membership first) became the scourge of the Labour Party. His activities during the British elections showed him to be a "commie-basher", a crusade that he carried out in Hong Kong against China, without knowing anything about the Chinese style of socialism. He was therefore on the same crusade as Martin Lee, who had shown no interest in democracy or human rights until it was confirmed that Hong Kong would be decolonised, when overnight he became the star of democracy. Martin behaved in a manner as once depicted in a cartoon about Ronald Reagan. Reagan was said to have an eye defect: when he looked right, everything was fine; but when he looked left, everything was wrong. Martin saw no injustices in Hong Kong but had his eye always on China's faults.

I have great admiration for people who stick to principles, but there are times when one should listen to others and if necessary compromise, because no one is perfect in his judgment. We meet these non-compromisers in religion and politics. They are the fundamentalists. They are dangerous. They are the stuff of which dictators are made.

Rumours began to circulate after the arrival of Mr. Patten that he would be making radical political changes, and that he spent an inordinate amount of time with those politicians who agreed with him. The members of the Executive Council, which was virtually the Governor's cabinet, are sworn to confidentiality. Nevertheless, it seemed certain that they were unhappy, and news leaked out that the Senior Member, Baroness Dunn, had proposed that, as an act of courtesy to the new Governor, they should offer to resign in the event that he wanted to choose a new cabinet. I cannot in my many years in Hong Kong remember any Governor who required all the Executive Council Members to resign. Their offer was held in abeyance for a long time. Intrigue was already operating at Government House, and delay in dealing with the offer to resign was all part of Patten's guile as will be seen.

Meanwhile, some of the Members of the Legislative Council, foreseeing there would be changes, were discussing political issues within their parties. However there were a number of independents who had no party connections and as the House Committee Chairman I asked if they would go on a trip to Beijing with me, as the parties were doing. The plan was then made to meet the head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in Beijing, Mr. Lu Ping, a person we all knew and greatly respected. Among the independents was Emily Lau, an outspoken opponent of the Chinese Government. I felt that, different though we were in our views, she should be invited if she wished to attend. Some of the other members objected and said that if she went with us, they would withdraw. Luckily Ms Lau went on one of her political stunts abroad,
so the problem of including her was solved. I think, if I remember correctly, that she complained about being omitted from the group.

In the end five of us paid the visit to Beijing. During our discussions with LU Ping we questioned him as to whether changes could be made to the Basic Law since rumours were rife that this would be attempted by Chris Patten. Mr. LU was very clear and very fair on that. He told us that under the British colonial system until the end of June 1997, we could make any changes we wanted because China would not interfere in the Hong Kong colonial government. However, the Basic Law had been enacted over a period of about six years, with input by hundreds of Hong Kong people through the Basic Law Consultative Committee (of which some of us including myself had been members), and it had then been hammered out by the Basic Law Drafting Committee which included some Hong Kong lawyers and laymen, and finally passed into law by the National People's Congress. Mr. LU said that the Basic Law had then become the constitution for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to be implemented on 1 July 1997. If any changes contrary to the Basic Law were introduced into Hong Kong before 1 July, they would be in contravention to conditions under which the Legislative Councillors elected in 1995 would be allowed to continue straight through until the next elections in 1999. This arrangement, a concession by China, was known as the "through train". We all wished to have the "through train" reserved, to ensure a smooth transition of power. Patten and his ally Martin Lee seemed determined to break the conditions for the through train: they wanted to eat their cake and have it. They were pitting their puny minds against everyone involved and risking the peace of Hong Kong, but still, determined to have their way. We who opposed them were not as Martin Lee said, kowtowing to China. We were keeping a law that had been agreed by a majority in all discussions. Martin Lee and his ally, Szeto Wah, had been the only opponents, a minority of two on the Basic Law Drafting Committee on which other Hong Kong people also sat. But that was Martin: it had to be his way, or no way. Patten was even more blameworthy because as a newcomer he knew little about anything, and had come with a closed mind on every issue.

Our group in Beijing also asked Mr. LU about the possibility, which we had heard, that Patten would change the composition of the Executive Council (the cabinet). It had always included some members of the Legislative Council, some senior officials of the Government, and some well-known public figures. The Basic Law followed the same pattern and offered no changes to the system of appointments. It seemed to be Patten's intention to exclude all but appointed members, only one of the three categories. Lu Ping, in answer to our query about that, simply repeated firmly that the present Hong Kong Government could make any changes it wished before 1997, but on 1 July 1997, the Basic Law would be implemented, and if there was no convergence with the Basic Law there could be no through train. It seemed a perfectly reasonable argument. China had never intervened in the British constitution for Hong Kong, so why should Britain try to change the Chinese constitution? Any changes would be unhelpful, unnecessary, and would prevent any smooth transition. After all, China had made huge concessions to Britain in the
letters of exchange with Douglas Hurd, and in any case was offering a democratic system more progressive than anything Britain had offered in one and a half centuries of colonial rule. I am absolutely sure that if 1997 had not been round the corner, Britain would have continued with her undemocratic system, and Martin Lee would never have emerged as a champion for democracy. Now he had become Governor Patten's "éminence gris", and there must have been times when Patten felt he had put himself (not to mention the Hong Kong people) in a most inflexible situation.

When we returned to Hong Kong from Beijing, I wrote to the Governor and explained in my letter of 12 September 1992, the need to keep within the Basic Law, and suggested we should concentrate more on social problems which are of more concern to the people. I ended my letter with these words: "I believe that the majority of Hong Kong people known to me would rather see a peaceful transition in 1997 than to make changes which might make things worse instead of better in 1997." I did not claim, as some petty politicians do, that I was speaking for "all the Hong Kong people". I leave such statements to Emily Lau and Martin Lee who continually confuse their own wishes with those of ALL the Hong Kong people. Unfortunately, westerners, especially Americans, being unfamiliar with the past history of Hong Kong, are inclined to swallow these stories about "democratic stars" speaking for ALL the people of their country. This propaganda suits the purposes of American politicians who have something different from democracy on their agenda which they peddle under the name of "human rights".

My letter was posted to Patten about a month before he was to make his October policy address. On 18 September he replied:

"Thank you for your letter of 12 September. It was kind of you to send me your thoughts on the constitutional issue that I will be addressing in my Legco speech on 7 October. I am of course fully aware of the force of the points you make on the Basic Law and on continuity in 1997, and very much agree with your suggestion that social issues are of greater importance to many people in Hong Kong than extra seats in Legco.

At this stage, all I can say in response is that I will be dealing frankly with these issues on 7 October. I hope that what I have to say will not entirely disappoint you." It did disappoint me, entirely. It began five years of political turmoil that split our community in two. The same had happened in every former colony. Patten saw the importance of continuity, but went his own way to break it. As far as he was concerned, the Basic Law was just garbage at his private disposal.

The rise of Patten in British politics is unclear because when he was announced the next Governor, I found that very few people in Britain had ever heard about him. Apparently he had been spotted by Margaret Thatcher as a smart (maybe too smart) young man, and he apparently wrote her speeches at some period, including the time of the controversial poll tax. I see a tremendous likeness in their method of operation, steamrolling over everyone's opinions, and ridiculing their opponents. That seems to be part of the British political scene, but it fits ill with diplomacy in dealing with other countries. I believe it is prejudiced attitudes such as Margaret Thatcher held against one side in the Irish problem that hindered an earlier peace agreement. In fact when I heard that Patten might be asked to play some part in present-day negotiations in Northern Ireland, I groaned at the
idea, and wrote to Tony Blair asking if he realised that he would probably alienate both sides. Mo Mowlam I said, seemed to be doing a great job, and we did not want Patten to behave as he had done in Hong Kong. Of course I received no concrete reply and did not expect it. Much though I admire some of the things the new Labour Party has done since its rise to power, I have not been able to trust that party (of which I was once an admirer) since it gave its support to Patten. As an opposition party, it seemed to be guided more by the "Rule Britannia" spirit than the, "Is it right?" questioning. In this racially biased world, it would be encouraging to see the end of the enemy-creating attitude,"My country, right or wrong".

In spite of Chris Patten's allegedly (since this is only hearsay) being raised to high position by Mrs. Thatcher, it appears that he was one of those who helped to have her resign. There was nothing wrong in that if it was felt that she had become a liability to the country. What I would like to understand is exactly why she was advised to resign. Was it her bad relations with Europe? Was it her domineering manner that gave her a reputation that she attacked with her handbag? The former arms dealer, Gerald James seems to think otherwise. In his book, "In the Public Interest", he produces facts that point the finger at civil servants, the Ministry of Defence, some Members of Parliament, and the Tory Party including Mrs., Thatcher. The facts as given by James indicate that illegal arms deals were continually made with Iraq, to which country the sale of weapons was banned, and that the illegal trade was carried on with the full knowledge and actual assistance of the persons I have just mentioned. James, not realising that his company was being used, not realising that arms were even being clandestinely stored on the huge areas of land allocated to him, not realising that deals were being made using his company's name and receipts without his initial knowledge or agreement, eventually discovered that he was in danger of being named as the illegal dealer of arms produced clandestinely by the ministry or its associates. When he showed resistance, he was like others in the trade made the scapegoat, put out of business and even feared for his life. The illegal trade cost the lives of others, like Gerald Bull who was shot dead, some who had mysterious accidents or died of mysterious diseases, and some just murdered. According to James, the Scott report never got to the root of the problems, and he believes that the illegal trade continues. He suspects that money from the trade reached the pockets of some politicians, some civil servants, including M15 and M16 agents - and, he believes, the Tory Party. The way in which that party lobbied donations even in Hong Kong certainly lays the party open to suspicion. James' question is, what was the real reason why Mrs., Thatcher had to resign? And my own question is, if Mr. Patten and others pressured her to resign for that reason, what did Patten do to assist in the Scott report? Of course I do not claim that Mr. Patten did know, but am merely saying that if he did know, what steps did he take to exonerate manufacturers like Gerald James, who became the scapegoats and lost their life's work and became bankrupt? Mr. Patten has strongly condemned corruption in Asia, but is he prepared to condemn it in Britain, or in his own party? And of course the same question must be addressed to the Labour Government. What are they prepared to do? Apparently Robin Cook made an effort but did not have all the facts.
A very much embittered Gerald James says, "The national interest became muddied by the interest of those in power, and the democratic process is under dire threat, for what does it matter whom the public elects to office if the permanent government (by which he means those unelected but in power continually) is unchanged and rotten to the core."

Recent reports say that Chris Patten in his book has something to say about this part of the world, Asia, though I cannot imagine what he knows about any country in which he has never lived, and whose language and culture he does not understand.

Might it not be useful if he would help to clean up the doorstep of his own country? Personally I did not know of the existence of these corrupt deals, which James dates back only mainly to the 1890s. I was never near enough to the centre of power in the British Government to dream of these malpractices. Had I been aware, I might have fought corruption there as I had to fight it here under the British colonial system.

Democracy cannot live with corruption. And to those in power, I end this chapter with the words, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"

There were enough dirty tricks played on the political scene in Hong Kong during the Patten years to lose quite a lot of souls!