

A Profile of Christopher Patten, Last British Governor of Hong Kong

by Peter Barry, M.M.

The official one page biography (handed out to journalists by Government House) of Christopher Francis Patten, 28th and last British governor of Hong Kong, reads (excerpted) as follows:

Christopher Francis Patten was born in 1944. He was educated at St. Benedict's School, Ealing; Balliol College, Oxford (BA Hons. and MA Hons. Modern History) and won a Coolidge Travelling Scholarship to the USA in 1965.

Mr. Patten joined the Conservative Research Department in 1966, specializing in home affairs. In 1974 he was appointed the youngest ever Director of the Conservative Research Department, a post which he held until 1979. He was elected a Member of Parliament from the constituency of Bath in May 1979, and held this office until April 1992.

From November 1979 to January 1981, Mr. Patten was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the House of Commons and the Minister for the Arts (Mr. Norman St. John-Stevas), and from



March to September 1981 Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Social Services (Mr. Patrick Jenkin MP).

Mr. Patten was Vice-Chairman of the Conservative Parliamentary Finance Committee 1981-83, a member of the House of Commons Select Committee on Defense (1982-83) and a member of the Select Committee on Procedure (Finance) 1982-83. In 1983 he published "The Tory Case," a study of Conservatism.

Following the General Election of June 1983, Mr. Patten was appointed Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office and in September 1985 Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science. In September 1986 he was appointed Minister for Overseas Development at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. He was appointed to the Privy Council in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in June 1989. In July 1989 Mr. Patten was appointed Secretary of State for the Environment. In November 1990 he became Chairman of the Conservative Party.

Mr. Patten was appointed Governor of Hong Kong in April 1992, and arrived in Hong Kong 9 July 1992 to take up his post.

Mr. Patten married Lavender Thornton in 1971. They have three daughters, Kate (born in 1973, Laura (1974) and Alice (1979). Mr. Patten reads a lot and is keen on tennis and travel.

What the biography does not say is that Governor Patten is a fervent Catholic. As a career politician, one might ask how his faith influences his political decisions. In an article entitled *Faith in Politics* in the April 1992 issue of the English Catholic magazine *Priests and People* Mr. Patten took up this question. In it he admits that, as a Catholic, he considers the social encyclicals, like *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (1891) and its centenary commemorative, *Centesimus Annus* by Pope John Paul II (1991), as guidelines for his actions in the political sphere. He wrote: "Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* warned us all...that man was not law unto himself. I assume other Christians feel the same. I am not bound hand and foot by the dictates of a Church demanding my temporal obedience. But I am aware of the Christian message and of my Church's interpretation of it. A Christian in politics...is not a pilgrim without a map." (p. 149)

Regarding *Centesimus Annus* Mr. Patten noted that it applies the principles enunciated by Pope Leo XIII in the earlier encyclical to the contemporary world. He wrote: "However general may be its ar-

guments, it does provide a rather more coherent Christian presentation of social and economic issues than has been attempted by most other Christian Churches. The encyclical recognises the place of profit, ownership and liberty in a liberal capitalist system. What it asserts is the case for a socially responsible market economy.” (p. 150) Some may argue that the Papal encyclicals are too vague. “Thank heavens for that,” Mr. Patten writes, “The Church is not giving its endorsement to a particular Party or programme...What the Church is doing is to fulfill its historic mission of enunciating guiding principles.” (p. 151)

Four years later, in a June 1996 interview with the Union of Asian Catholic News (UCAN), the now Governor Patten treated again the question of faith’s role in politics. In answer to the UCAN question: “How does your Catholic faith affect your political decisions?” Governor Patten answered: “I don’t think anyone’s religious, spiritual views should necessarily give them a precise political agenda...day by day. I don’t think I say when I get up in the morning, ‘Here are 10 things that I have to do because I’m a Catholic.’ On the other hand, I think my religious views infuse my attitude to an approach to public affairs.

“The Church’s social teaching, the Church’s encyclicals on social issues, inevitably suffer from two things. First of all, that they’re translated from Latin. Secondly, that they have to reflect the complexity of public events, and public choices. Let me give you an example. Classically in social teaching, the Church has rejected the more extreme forms of socialism, and by and large accepted the case of market economics. But equally, the Church has rejected the extremes of market economics, and accepted the case for social responsibility in the management of an economy.

“Is that telling us that the Church’s position is so general as to be less than useful? I don’t believe that’s true. I think what it’s telling us is the Church is pretty realistic about the complexities of decision-making in government or in running an economy. But it insists that there are some values which need to be reflected, which need to be taken into account by any Christian who’s in a decision making position.”

In response to the question: “Have your decisions as governor been affected by the way you as a Catholic believer regard people and

yourself in society?” Governor Patten answered: “I have never done a job before in which I’ve been so aware of the difference between right and wrong. I’ve never done a job before where I’ve so often had to say to people, ‘Look, we must do this or that, not because it’s expedient to do it, but because it’s right to do it.’ And I think that is a reflection, I hope, of my moral beliefs, my religious beliefs.” (UCAN Dispatch No. 877/B June 27-28, 1996, p. 9)

Governor Patten was also no doubt encouraged by *Centesimus Annus*’ endorsement of democracy in his modest proposals for democratic reform in Hong Kong. “The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.” (Para.46)

The above then offers some possible examples of the influence of the last British governor’s Catholic faith on his political life and activity.