

INTERVIEW / CHRIS PATTEN

A different style

Two days after unveiling an important series of constitutional reform proposals in a speech to Hongkong's Legislative Council (Legco), Governor Chris Patten discussed

his political philosophy with REVIEW Editor L. Gordon Crovitz and Arts & Society Editor Frank Ching. Excerpts:

Does your appointment as governor signify a fundamental shift in the British position towards Hongkong?

I helped to draft the British Conservative Party manifesto which, of course, included a statement about Hongkong, and that remains the policy of the British Government. But obviously I bring to the job slightly different perceptions and maybe a different style, and I don't think that the distinction between style and substance is always as great as people suppose.

The fact that I'm not a Sinologist has been used as a stick to beat me by one or two pro-Peking newspapers. Maybe I would be taking a different approach if I did come from that background, but I think that openness is a servant of political stability rather than secrecy. I think that a good relationship stems from decisions you take jointly with others. I don't think you have something called a good relationship which stands abstractly and then everything else has to be done in order not to affect that relationship.

Yet you're dealing with people in Peking to whom that approach is entirely new.

Well, they must be starting to understand by now that I am enormously predictable, because I do actually attempt to say what I want to do. It may be inconvenient, but I think it would be far easier for us to do business in the political sphere, or when talking about the airport, if that was recognised.

Let me give you an example. Ever since anyone suggested that there might be some political linkage between the airport and constitutional development, I've made it clear that it's not something I can ever contemplate.

Would you agree that even if everything you proposed were acceptable to the Chinese and passed, Hongkong would not have a democratic government?

It wouldn't have the same sort of democracy as Westminster. It would have a government which was accountable to a broadly based legislature. It would have, I think, sufficient democracy to help secure

Hongkong's way of life for the future.

You are trying to increase the representativeness of the legislature while emphasising that this will remain a strong executive-led government. But the executive will not be democratically produced.

The chief executive in the [post-1997] special administrative region would have more democratic credentials, in a sense, than I do, because he would at least have emerged from a process of a broader selection than I emerged from. But the chief executive would not be elected in a way the president of the United States is elected.

Whenever Hongkong people have been allowed to vote they have voted for more democracy. Do you think that your programme allows for enough participation by elected representatives of the people?

Yes, I do. I think that the challenge for



Will Patten be the last great anti-communist?

us is to develop the legislature so that it can hold the executive to account in a responsible and effective way. My gut instinct is that Hongkong people want increasing democracy but they want it secured in a way which has a good chance of lasting. It should be consistent with the Basic Law, and that's what I've tried to design in certain proposals.

One of the arguments against greater democracy here comes from businessmen. Your call for democracy creates uncertainty. How do you persuade them that greater democracy would create more stability here in Hongkong and, therefore, that it would be better for business?

What business needs above all, in the long term, is the certainty of the rule of law — of laws democratically enacted and

rooted in the community. I don't think multinationals would want to be here if this was a less free society and the rule of law was constantly eroded.

But I think there are other more immediate practical considerations as well. If I had said: "I am going to go to Peking and sooner or later I'll tell you what we've decided," that would have produced the usual speculation. I don't think that sort of politics is good for stability in Hongkong.

Secondly, is it more destabilising to try to accommodate, in a modest way, people's political and democratic aspirations or to block them off? I think the business community needs to consider those issues, and I strongly feel that the business community has become a great deal more sophisticated in dealing with them.

Are you optimistic that Hongkong in 1997 and afterwards will be one of the more democratic countries in this region? If so, will that be because of Hongkong's achievements or because of the lack of democracy in neighbouring countries?

I think that there is a danger of applying a customary Western political assumption to Asian societies. I was brought up to believe that there is almost a mechanistic connection between economic freedom and political liberty. That is observedly not the case in Asia, though I think that economic freedom in time has political consequences.

There are different sorts of democracy in Asia, but they are all, I suspect, moving in the same direction and all of them are demonstrating that democracy is not destabilising and that greater democracy helps to make communities more prosperous. It helps to make a government better too.

You've come to Hongkong at a time in world history when a great ideological battle seems to be more or less over. Would you be happy if you were remembered, after you leave Hongkong, as being the last great anti-communist?

I'm an old fashioned Tory, which means that I believe, as [British statesman and author] John Buchan said, that "politics is an honourable adventure."

What I am trying to do in Hongkong is an important adventure, but I don't think it's so much one involving hostility to a particular political ideology as a commitment to a system of values. It's the value system which has near its core the proposition that the average man and woman are a great deal better than the average. ■