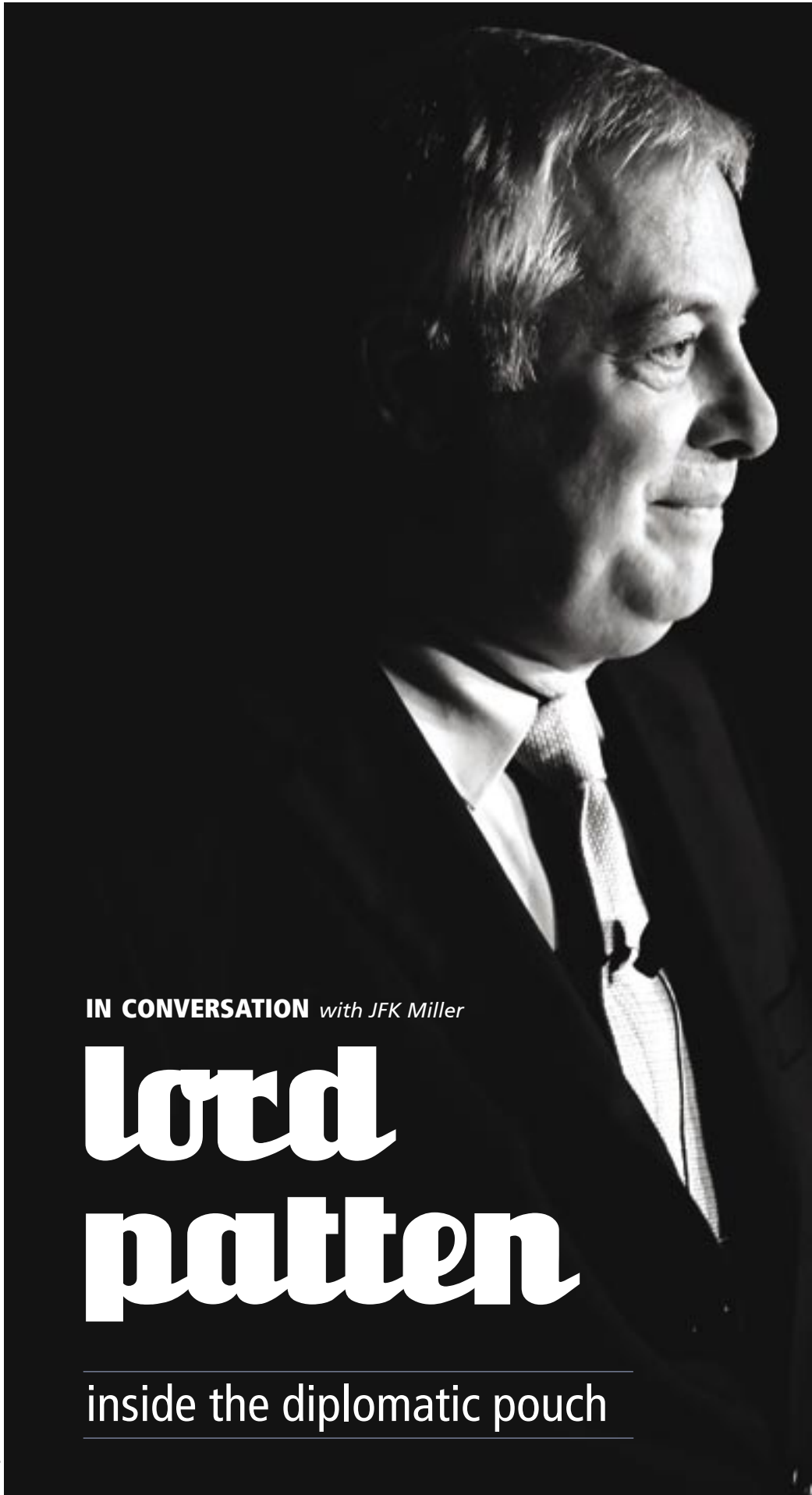


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IN CONVERSATION *with JFK Miller*

lord patten

inside the diplomatic pouch

Mick Ryan

I'm in the back seat of a hire car with Lord Chris Patten, the 'Last Governor' of Hong Kong and former European Commissioner for External Relations. I'm here because Lord Patten, according to his press agent, doesn't like to waste a minute. As such, I've been allowed to hitch a ride with him from Pudong airport on the way to his first appointment in Shanghai, a business lunch at the Shangri-La hotel. Lord Patten is in town to publicize his new book, *Not Quite the Diplomat*, so it's no surprise that my fellow riders include Adrian Greenwood from Penguin Books and Sammy Cheng from Chaterhouse Books. In the following abbreviated transcript of our conversation, Lord Patten discusses the writing process, diplomacy, and his long-held fascination with China.

that's: How long did it take you to write *Not Quite the Diplomat*?

Lord Patten: I started at the end of November and finished it just after Easter. So I wrote it in about four, five months. But while doing a lot of other things as well; it was quite hard work. The previous one, *East and West*, I'd been able to write at my house in France. I'd simply gone there after leaving Hong Kong and I spent four or five months and had an extremely nice time writing and gardening.

that's: Describe your relationship with China.

LP: I remember going to see [the former President of the People's Republic of China] Jiang Zemin and he said, which was a compliment I suppose, 'You're one of the few Europeans who really understands China.' I've just written a piece about *The Three Emperors* exhibition in London at the Royal Academy, a long essay for the *Guardian* which I think they would regard as confirming the fact that I know quite a bit about Chinese history.

that's: And you are, I understand, a collector of Chinese art?

LP: Yep, I am.

that's: You're a China fan really.

LP: Yeah, I'm hugely, obsessively interested in China and Chinese history and art.

that's: Do you think you'll always be involved with this part of the world?

LP: I think I will always be particularly interested in this part of the world and in India. India is another one of my obsessions. I've just become the British Chairman of the British India Round Table which is a meeting of academics and businessmen that happens every year that tries to develop relations bilaterally with India. These are two spectacular countries in which I'm extremely interested.

that's: And to which you devote an entire chapter in your book. I like the title of the chapter, 'Meanwhile, Asia Rises'. Do you feel that while America has been bogged

down with the war in Iraq that China has been getting gloriously rich?

LP: Well, I think that what the Chinese probably do believe is that they don't have to bother too much about military competition with the United States, even if they develop their armed forces ... that the name of the game is getting on with economic growth. And I hope convincing America while doing that, that China doing well isn't a threat to anybody.

that's: It's been eight years now since you've been Governor of Hong Kong. (LP raises an eyebrow).

that's: Can you comment on the current state of affairs there.

LP: There is still, undoubtedly, a wholly credible legal system in Hong Kong and a good court of final appeal, a very good chief justice and the rule of law still exists in Hong Kong. The legal profession has behaved – I don't often say this about lawyers – behaved extremely well. Hong Kong is still a free society. I think that it was an American political scientist who said that Hong Kong was the only society that was liberal but not democratic and I think that is true. Clearly, none of us, nobody, could have foreseen the Asian financial crash, though some of us in the mid '90s were warning about crony capitalism, but I think Hong Kong recovered from that extremely well. I'm not sure I would have had the bottle to intervene in the stock market in the way that the government did. Hong Kong is still a community with a very strong sense of citizenship – stronger than in most places in Asia – and still a place where it's good to live and good to invest.

that's: What are your observations on Shanghai vis-à-vis Hong Kong? You've been here a number of times I think.

LP: Yeah, I have. I've been here probably more often since I left Hong Kong than I've been to Hong Kong. Been here four or five times. The first time I came you were picking your way down the Bund from one electric bulb to another. It's an extraordinary explosion of entrepreneurial growth and a pretty exciting place to be. I don't think that Shanghai's success is at the expense of Hong Kong or the other way around. This happening in China – this almost double digit growth – in an economy the size of China's provides enough elbow room for both cities.

that's: You're quite critical of the Bush administration. To quote you from the book: 'America is more and more seen to contravene the principles that it enjoins others to follow.' Meaning America's behavior in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Grahیب, etc. That said, the Tories in Britain voted in favor of military action [in Iraq]. If you'd been a sitting member at the time how would you have voted?

LP: I'd have voted against it like Ken Clark. The interesting thing is that the

Conservative Party has done a number of foolish things in the last few years. One of them has been to behave like a sort of a European offshoot of the neo-conservatives, which began under Iain Duncan Smith and continued to some extent under Michael Howard, that tends to the view that 'America right or wrong' But every former Conservative Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary was against the war, Rifkind, Carrington...

that's: ... and Robin Cook as well.

LP: Absolutely. Though he wouldn't be regarded as a Conservative entirely. Even in Mr Blair's government.

that's: You've spent enough time in this region to have a take on the Chinese character. Can you give me your view on what a typical Chinese is?

LP: No. I don't think ... I'm not sure there's a typical Chinese any more than there is a typical European or Brit. There are very good books like David Bonavia's on the Chinese, but they're all pretty sweeping generalizations. I think if I was to use generalizations, I would say that they are naturally entrepreneurial, extremely hardworking and have a real respect for education. And partly because of their language and the predominance of puns, or humor based on homophonic words, that they have a very good sense of humor.

(LP pauses, unwraps a package of mints and offers one to **that's**)

that's: Thank you.

that's: You're generally quite optimistic about China's future.

LP: On the point of optimism, you know this is over a fifth of humanity, so if you're pessimistic about China, then God help us all. Incidentally, all this tree planting is – when you think of China – it's terrific.

that's: Much like Singapore?

LP: In Singapore everything is cleaned with a tooth brush. I was thinking of that as we were flying in. The land between the runway, which in Singapore would be mown grass whereas here it's weeds and wildflowers.

that's: What about UK/China relations?

LP: I think China has a much more profound sense of history and precedent than we do. It's partly reflected in that story, which may be apocryphal, about [former Premier and Foreign Minister] Zhou Enlai being asked: 'What lessons should be drawn from the French Revolution?' And the reply: 'I think it's too early to tell.' We're all, to some extent, prisoners of our history but I think there's probably a more profound understanding of history in China than in some European countries.

that's: You've described this as a 'farewell dispatch'. This is surely not the last that we'll be hearing from Lord Patten?

LP: No, it's not. I mean there'll be another book in a couple of year's time.

that's: A dissection of your

“... I think I've written for myself a small footnote in modern Chinese history which I hope is for good, rather than ill.”

Chancellorship at Oxford?

LP: No, no, no (laughs). A book on the limits of national sovereignty. The extent to which global problems from epidemic disease to the environment, organized crime, drugs, all require nation states to work together, and national boundaries are increasingly porous with technology, travel and so on. And I want to write a book about how in those circumstances the world works.

that's: But you're not winding down, surely? I mean, you are only 60.

LP: I know. I feel about 120. No, I'm not. My wife thinks that I should have wound down a little bit but no I've got an incredibly demanding diary. In the last fortnight, I've been at home two nights. I was in Estonia, Sweden, Norway and Ukraine. I'm going on to Australia from Hong Kong. I'm then back for a weekend during which I've got to give the annual university sermon. I think I go off to Paris the following Monday. I then go off to New York the following Friday or Saturday.

that's: Do you think, leading on from that, that you can achieve more outside of the political system than inside, like Jimmy Carter, for instance?

LP: Yes, he was a much better ex-President than he was a President. No, I don't actually think that it's true that you can do more outside formal politics. But it's pretty unsatisfactory being in opposition if what you like doing in politics is making things happen. And the best alternative to making things happen is to argue about what should happen rather than find yourself constrained by party discipline and whips. And so I'm able to write and say things which I couldn't say if I was part of the Conservative shadow cabinet or whatever, not that I would be. So, yeah, I'm going to stir things up.

that's: Good. Looking forward to that. So this is a flying visit for you? You're leaving tomorrow morning.

LP: Yeah.

that's: And you're not going to Beijing? This is the only stop on the Chinese mainland?

LP: I shall probably be going to Beijing

either later in the year or early next year. I mean, for other reasons as well as book signing.

that's: So it is truly a world wind trip.

LP: It's a world wind trip, here [in Shanghai] and then three days in Hong Kong which are sort of dawn to dusk, signing or speaking.

that's: Do you miss life in Hong Kong?

LP: Life has moved on. I mean, my job in Hong Kong was the best I've ever had.

And it was salutary to think at 52, or whatever I was, 53, that that was the best job that I'd ever have, and there it was. But it wasn't something to get broody about. It was something that you could feel grateful for having had the opportunity to do. My family was very happy there too. Had a great life. Wonderful place.

that's: You're first chapter is entitled 'Now We Are Sixty'. How will your legacy be viewed?

LP: I hope that, whether or not anything is named after me, I'll be remembered as having helped Hong Kong through a very difficult period. It wasn't written in the stars that those five years would be stable and prosperous. I think I'll be principally remembered for what happened in Hong Kong, though the job I did immediately after that, the reform of the police in Northern Ireland will I think always be identified with my name. But I'm quite interested in how well known I am in China. Two weeks ago at the Oxford Aegis Society, which is largely made up of [people from the] Chinese mainland, but others as well – Malaysian Chinese, Singaporeans, Hong Kong, Macanese – gave a dinner for me. We had a meeting afterwards. I should think three hundred, three hundred and fifty people turned up. Anywhere I go on this book tour in Britain, every time I do anything at a university, there are lots of Chinese students. I mean, I'm a well known figure. Rather too large a figure (LP looks at his waistline). So, I think I've written for myself a small footnote in modern Chinese history which I hope is for good, rather than ill. Well, we'll see. ■