



‘I hope I’ll get to know  
Oxfordshire as well as I did  
when I was drinking it dry as a  
young undergraduate’

*He was the last Governor of Hong Kong, holds a hatful of positions and appointments and runs a frenetic diary that would break a less energetic man. Sandra Fraser met the 159th Chancellor of Oxford University, the Rt Hon Lord Patten of Barnes CH...*

*Photography by Mark Fairhurst*



CHRIS Patten, or CP as he has been signing himself during our email exchanges – he arranged this appointment himself – is either tired or bored or both, I think, as I shake hands with him – he doesn't appear too pleased to see me as he ushers me into a side room in the Vice-Chancellor's offices in Wellington Square, Oxford.

It's impersonal, it's sparse and his laptop case sits on a chair beside him, the airline check-in tag still attached. He has a stack of Blackwell's bags beside him on a table and looks more jowly in the flesh than his photographs allow, which he later volunteers is the result of his love of good food, too much time in the air and too little exercise.

"I used to play tennis every morning in Hong Kong," he tells me ruefully.

Approached discreetly to be nominated as Chancellor of Oxford University he asked for time to think about the role's implications. He considered his relative youth an invitation to be very active and once chosen, Oxford University Chancellors retain the post until death (or the loss of their marbles, as Chris puts it), so agreeing represented a big commitment – and it meant an election. Who can forget the pain on his face when, Chris Patten, Tory Chairman, lost his Parliamentary seat in 1992, despite being, in many people's eyes, the architect of the party's return to Government? He wanted to know his nomination would gain support – which came from the highest echelons, as it turned out.

"At that stage I let my name go forward and the primary reason I did so was because it's such a wonderful and prestigious thing to do – it's a great world-class university, I'm interested in higher education and thought

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Chris Patten

that I could help the university, not least fundraising internationally," he says.

The lack of executive responsibility can be a frustration, but on the plus side, the job is an honour and involves meeting clever, remarkable people, he points out.

"I can't think of a better or more interesting pro bono job to be doing," he says.

Chris Patten has already enjoyed one *Oxfordshire Life* and this is his second. As an undergraduate at Balliol he played for a cricket team called the Eccentrics.

"We used to play a lot of the village sides around Oxfordshire and by the end of most

summers I had a pretty good feel for the best pubs in the county," he says, with a twinkle in his eye.

He finds Oxfordshire beautiful and classes Oxford as one of the great cities of the world, no small compliment given his international lifestyle and experience. Since the beginning of September he has been to the States twice, visited India, Spain, Greece, Italy, The Gulf and probably elsewhere if he could only remember. Modern travel is comfortable but this in turn masks the true toll such an international schedule extracts, he says.

"My main home is in London and I also have a house in France, but we bought a flat in north Oxford in the Woodstock Road so we have a base here. I like being here for a weekend, being able to walk over to Port Meadow, being able to walk to the shops in Summertown, shopping in the covered market, Blackwells," he nods to the stack of books at his side, "just the whole buzz of the place. But I hope I'll get to know the county as well as I did when I was drinking it dry as a young undergraduate."

He's lightening up and is tickled pink when I tell him Simon Hoggart recently remarked that he has the most genuine laugh in politics. Suddenly the laconic Chris Patten has gone, he later apologises for seeming disinterested, he has been talking all day and he's dry-throated rather than tired – and he wants to get home to his wife Lavender and two of his daughters in London so he can see his grandchildren.

Chris retains an interest in politics – Rab Butler and Edward Boyle were his political heroes – but it's foreign policy that fires him up and he has been outspoken about Iraq and Iran and has strong views about Palestine, Israel, the European Union and Russia.

"I guess I'm still interested in political debate, and I'm passionately interested as an individual in what's happening in Asia, in India and China," he says, seriously.

He switches back into a more relaxed mode, still thinking about that 'genuine laugh' remark.

"I'm not sure that I laugh in order to deflect criticism or arguments. I usually laugh because I think an awful lot of life is extremely funny," he says. He started writing a diary after a particularly hilarious Hong Kong weekend (he's chortling as he recalls the incidents), but it's meant as a reminder of an amusing life, not as

something to be published in future.

He shrugs off criticism of his approach to Hong Kong's handover – notably his detractors were retired diplomats, but he feels, 10 years on, Hong Kong has worked out very well. He counts his time and job there as the best of his life, so much so, his composure almost cracked as he left on the Royal Yacht Britannia, accompanied by Lavender, their three daughters, Kate, Laura and Alice (who sobbed as they left the former colony) and Prince Charles.

"It is still not a democracy but there is a democratic spirit there, a real sense of citizenship," he says.

He had, at the time, a heated relationship with the People's Republic of China and remains critical of its human rights record, he says, but that doesn't stop him being a friend of the nation and he has been invited to speak there.

"It's ridiculous to suppose you can only have a reasonable relationship with people if you agree with whatever they have to say... that foreign policy is about being nice to foreigners."

He has discovered throughout life that he has continued to find things to enthuse him and is still making new friends.

"I thought that friendship was somehow

finite; that there would become a point in my life when I stopped acquiring new friends. But you don't – and I acquire new enthusiasms," he says. Gardening, reading Chinese history and literature, Indian-written novels, he reels off a list of names of novelists he enjoys.

It wasn't his dream to become an MP, much less to hold the Chancellor's post. He was offered a job as a BBC graduate traineeship – "They were like gold-dust so people were surprised when I turned it down in order to do a job in politics; but I hadn't been political here, I got involved in politics because I was on a scholarship in the

United States and fetched up working in a political campaign and the adrenalin, the buzz, the smell of the grease-paint..."

His daughter Alice is an actor and he feels that a life on the stage requires courage. But isn't it akin to his own life in politics? I ask. Standing on stage in the glare of the cameras, waiting for election results only to find you've lost?

He admits that was a painful experience but he escaped becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer and instead 12 years of interesting jobs followed, during which he has dealt with the toughest negotiators, Vladimir Putin among them, "Somebody once said 'You can take the man out of the KGB but you can't take the KGB out of the man'," he says. "I think there's more than a sliver of truth in that."

He was chairman of the independent commission on policing for Northern Ireland set up as part of the Good Friday Peace Agreement, was European Commissioner in Brussels and took his seat in the House of Lords in 2005. Last year he was appointed Co-Chair of the UK-India Round Table.

So what would he like to see happen during his time as Oxford's Chancellor?

"I'd like Oxford to still be one of the best universities in the world. I'd like it if people said it was the best in the world, not the second best to Harvard. I'd like to look back to hugely successful fundraising to increase our endowments so we can pay people better and increase the size of bursaries for poorer students and I'd hope that Oxford was an exciting place, great museum, great music and great research and a unique learning experience in the world."

Surely, in the light of his experience, gaining support and extracting money for the university must be a breeze?

He leans back in his chair, regards me with his deep blue eyes and puts his hands behind his head.

"I think anybody who has been involved with real politics, when they observe university politics, feels like a herbivore looking at carnivores," he says wryly.

Then seconds later, he's out of the door, having his photograph taken beside the portraits of his predecessors, Roy Jenkins and Harold Macmillan, greeting and being greeted by passers-by in the front foyer, dangling his brown suede shoes over the step as he sits. Then he's gone, leaving a void and the wish you'd had more time with him. It's not only his laugh that is genuine. ■



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