

Chris Patten

Talking about a politician's past, what he did, what he showed himself capable of, is the inevitable, if slightly wearying, part of any profile or assessment.

And yet the central preoccupation in the case of Chris Patten is with the future. Not to waste time, Mr Patten is, of all Conservative contenders, the one most likely to emerge as leader. He may indeed have to serve through the leadership of a prior successor to Mrs Thatcher. This will most probably be so if that lady's accelerating skid towards the front wheels of destiny continues during this next, most unpleasant, year for the Conservative government.

At the moment, post-Meyer, one can foresee a Heseltine leadership (dynamic) or a Howe command (eirenic)

the next-prime-minister-but-one of a significant group of youngish Tories leftward of the *Zeitgeist*.

His position as a Tory liberal may derive its first impetus from his political form: chosen by Ian Gilmour and advanced by Edward Heath. But all that was long ago. He was then very young, a small but potent conjuring of the mid-70s.

That package couldn't have lasted under the present dispensation without exceptional qualities. The logical course of a young politician with Patten's early background should have been either permanent commitment to the ocean, with or without a short ride in the SDP rowing boat, or total and subordinated absorption by the Thatcher regime, as Bulgaria rather than Finland.

In fact, he has kept a perfect balance between correct behaviour towards the prime minister and personal independence. He served her, unofficially as speech writer and in junior jobs which had begun to depress him, without either sulk or servility. He was a reservation-maker who played straightforwardly by the rules, soul delicately balanced against career expectations.

He has entered government on terms of rare independence, being charged with a green function he might have designed for himself. He has the credentials to be the prime minister's hired conscience on conservation. To be the designated successor of Nicholas Ridley, appointed to be not-Ridley, is a bonus of peculiar sweetness, the post of policeman with cigarette and cup of coffee succeeding a man seen, perhaps unfairly, as a Chilean gendarme.

This is not chance. The Tories needed a humane, liberal face. The environment was the first part of the political front at which a totalist market solution became manifestly unviable. Patten who, to use a theological term he would appre-



Chris Patten: Conservation conscience

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emerging as the seas rise higher and the pound sinks lower. In which case, Patten will be an important and rising member of the government of a new dispensation and, over five to seven years, slated as the ultimate successor. He is not a candidate for succeeding Mrs Thatcher direct, but more likely, sooner or later, to lead the Tory party than any other aspirant.

So, given the luck (and application) of the Tories, we are looking at a prime-minister-in-waiting. Now this may be a rather sweeping approach, though I have few doubts about it despite the great gifts and higher executive rank of a comparable figure, John Major.

For Patten is almost unique in having acquired a support group with its eyes on his leadership before entering the cabinet. He has long been

ciate, is an occasional conformist on the free market, was both the most prominent doubter within promotion range and, at a time when the Conservatives, like Macbeth, had most need of blessing from an unloving electorate, the most straightforwardly attractive.

No assessment of Chris Patten should ignore the unsophisticated, banal fact of straightforward attractiveness! The niceness matters. He is funny. He has an endearing kind of hilarity at life. He is without mania or twitch. He likes other people. He reads poetry (Cavafy is an enthusiasm). Although ambitious, his soul wouldn't wither if the high trek were not fulfilled. He is a Christian (Roman Catholic) who doesn't go on about being a Christian.

The difference from Mrs Thatcher matters more in personal terms than in ideology. For Thatcher and the politically opposite Heath are alike: obsessed, humourless, narrowly preoccupied with politics, elephant-memored

for grievance and revenge, incapable of decent human relations with colleagues. A Patten leadership (or indeed a Major one) would be more collegiate and more comradely. Both Heath and Thatcher ran a siege economy of the soul. That sort of grim asphyxia is, I think, passing from the scene.

Any new Tory leader, stolid Howe, war-painted Heseltine, handcrafted Baker, would be calmer and frankly saner than their two predecessors. But Patten and Major represent the plateau of good humour necessary to their party now and natural to them.

My instinct for expecting Patten to emerge rests on his being the flair-and-following man, Major the perfect executive intelligence. But it hardly matters. Touching wood and crossing fingers, the Conservative Party is at least equipping itself for an age of good feeling - not good news in a partisan sense, to the Left, but in a more profound sense very good news indeed.

Edward Pearce