

# The Power To Change

There has been a remarkable change in the style and tone of government since John Major became prime minister. Are we witnessing the birth of a new kind of Conservatism?

David Marquand interviews Chris Patten



Chris Patten was appointed chairman of the Conservative Party last November. Previously he was secretary of state for the environment and minister for overseas development. He entered parliament in 1979 as MP for Bath. He is 46 and is married with three daughters.

**It has been argued that British politics tends to move in cycles, from an individualistic phase to a collectivist phase and back again. In the 40s you had a collectivist phase, the 50s were a more individualistic phase, the 60s collectivist and obviously the 80s were a very individualistic phase. Do you think that we are now moving back into a more collectivist phase?**

No. And it's what gave me some encouragement even during the darkest days of last year. I recall the anecdote that Bernard Donoghue tells, of going round Parliament Square during the 1979 election and Callaghan musing about the inevitability of what was about to hit them below the belt. Callaghan saying, there are occasions in politics when there's a tide running against you and whatever you do you're out. Now I have never felt that there was a tide running against the Conservative Party, or Conservative ideas in that sense. There hasn't been the mood for labourism or socialism - whatever that may be in the 90s - that there was for the ideas that Mrs Thatcher and others were articulating in the late 1970s. I don't think there is much sign of intellectual stirrings on the Left to produce that sort of climatic change, nor do I think that there is much feeling in the country that the time has come to go back to big spending, big taxing, big bureaucracy.

What I do think is that if we can find, more successfully than we've been able to in the past, an English rhetoric for what seems to come so naturally to the German Christian Democrats, namely the social market economy, then we're on to a very substantial winner which

will, among other things, ensure that John Major is prime minister for rather a long time. I say that because there is a feeling that while we need to continue to apply some of the economic lessons that we've been attempting to learn in the 1980s, there's also a feeling that we need to be more explicit about the social responsibilities that should go with successful individualism. We have to emphasise both the importance of the collective and the community and the need to find ways of using market mechanisms to run community services more effectively without appearing in the process to devalue those services.

**Do you think there are, within the political tradition of this country, the moral and intellectual resources to make that kind of Christian Democratic social market rhetoric mean something to British people?**

Advertising men would say that we were up against a problem with which they were familiar. If you're selling shampoo, they say, it's extremely difficult to sell it on the grounds that it's both good for clearing up dandruff and makes your hair lustrous. So, to continue an inadequate metaphor, they would say it's inherently difficult to argue a case for the social market economy. People can understand the social bit and they can understand the market bit but they can't see the two together. I don't actually think that's necessarily right, and the challenge is to prove it's not right. After all there are, inherent in patterns of human behaviour, things which underpin what should be a straightforward argument to get across. Hardly anybody, for example, attempts

to achieve even the most individualistic thing without having a broader social sense. You climb a mountain because mountains are there, and if you climb a very high one you put a national flag on the top. I think it's a terribly inadequate way of looking at political philosophy to assume such a split between the individual and the collective or the community, because people operate in both ways. I wrote in a widely-remembered book a few years ago that people in a way express their individualism best in groups larger than themselves, in their family, in their church, their club and their school, and the collective, the social, is important to the working out of your individualism. So that is a fairly fundamental aspect of human behaviour patterns. It doesn't seem to me that it should be impossible for politicians to find a way of encapsulating it in terms of political argument. What may make it more difficult for us in this country is the extent to which political argument was polarised into absurdities and was very often institutionalised into absurdities as well, for example, the way such large sections of industry were nationalised.

**Do you think the social market concept that you've just been talking about depends upon individual people accepting in their own lives, in their own behaviour, some kind of responsibility to the community? Can politicians do anything at all to foster this sense of responsibility, or does it lead to a rather awful preachy pie-in-the-sky kind of paternalism which in fact is counter-productive?**

First of all it is simply not an area or an issue which any politician can leave alone, for one very obvious utilitarian reason: you have to ask yourself as a politician why it is that every sort of voluntary work organisation in this country has been growing in membership in the last few years except political parties? Now that must tell you something about human impulse, and it must tell you something about the sort of political messages which the established parties have been sending out to people. But secondly, it is difficult to try to mobilise that activity without on the one hand sounding preachy or on the other sounding as though you wish to shuffle off responsibilities which should properly and legitimately be carried by the state, or underpinned by the state. Those are both difficulties for politicians, but I have no doubt that we should try to face up to them.

One way in particular in which governing politicians have to face up to them is by establishing the legitimacy of those organisations in the policy process. I've been in two areas, the environment and overseas development, where non-governmental organisations play, both in provision and in public education, a crucial role. And not to try to involve those organisations without either neutering them or feeling neutered in the process, is quite simply to cut oneself off from the action: and to so crab and confine government that it behaves less



imaginatively and less effectively than it would otherwise. They are plainly where a great deal of the vitality of our community is. The greatest disappointment I had when I was an education minister for a brief and not particularly glorious period, was that parents weren't already more involved and interested in education. Now we're starting, I hope, to find parents more prepared to come forward and play a part in education.

**It seems to me that you are suggesting a political style, perhaps something more than style, which is quite significantly different from that of the Thatcher governments of the 80s. Aren't you asking for a much more consensual style of leadership on the part of government than you've had in the last decade, a much less confrontational style, a much less radical style. It's not just government saying, 'Right, here is our agenda, we're going to smash it through, against the opposition of vested interests', it's government saying, 'Here we've got some thoughts, please tell us what your thoughts are, let's hash them out and discuss them and see if we can find some kind of common ground'.**

There's a tremendous amount in that which I'd like to unpick. First of all, I think it would be dangerous and wrong if we were to give the impression either that we had ceased to think radically or ceased to embrace change. Or that we intended to encourage a slide back into soft options, trying to apply butter to problems rather than solve them. I simply don't think that that would be the right way to govern the country and I don't think it would be electorally successful. But we have to establish a rhythm for our radicalism which matches the prevailing mood. I don't think people just want a quiet life and no change, but they want to feel that the government is setting about change in a deliberate and considered way. They feel after, for example, the experiences of which I have some knowledge - I now know more about local government finance than a human being should ever want to know - that we should attempt to convince rather more than we have in the past, and shouldn't rest our case as much as perhaps we have sometimes on assertion. Now that is not to say that we can cop out of change. I don't think that government's just about standing pat, as Richard Nixon once said, I think it's got to be about identifying further changes and there are changes that I'd like to make.

But there is another aspect to your question which I've touched on a bit already. We live in a plural society, in which there are a lot of active, informed non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which aren't political parties. One should attempt to involve them in discussion and debate. Involving them in that discussion may mean you change your mind or adapt your opinions, it may not. I used to say to voluntary groups that I was entitled to a point of view as well, and that, if they were entitled to slag me off, I was at least

entitled periodically to express my reservations about their point of view. But we shouldn't be so exclusive about policy development or about policy initiative. There are lots of bright ideas out there. Why are we taking environmental issues much more seriously, making them part of mainstream Whitehall management and thinking? Because of what NGOs have done.

#### **Where would you like to see radical change in the new decade?**

I think the main areas for us to concentrate on, apart from inflation, are education and training, putting more flesh on what has been said about opportunity. I hope we'll look at the problems of incentives and disincentives lower down the income scale. I hope we'll continue to look at ways in which, without losing the style or even the moral impulse of some great public services, we can use the principles and practices of the private sector to run them better. There's more we can say in the environmental field. But those are the main things. It's a terrific challenge because if we can rise to it, come the next election, we will be able to fight not only on our record but also on our ideas. And find ourselves contesting for power with an opposition which can't by definition have much of a record, and doesn't have any ideas either.

**I was very intrigued by that list. Not long ago I was in a discussion with somebody from the Institute of Economic Affairs and somebody from the Labour Party think-tank, the IPPR, and we were talking about the issues of the 90s. We took some of the ones that you've mentioned, obviously the economy and the environment, but there were two others which all three of us thought were going to be central, neither of which you've mentioned. One was Europe, the other was constitutional and political reform. You don't think that these are areas in which radical thought is necessary, or you don't think they're interesting or important, or what?**

I think they're interesting and important, I didn't mention Europe because policy will develop on Europe on foot, as civil servants say, of the work in the Intergovernmental Conferences. My own hunch is that in Europe on both economic convergence and political convergence, we will find ourselves much more in the van than people customarily suppose. Let me give one example of why I think that: there's a wonderful poem by Cavafy, who I think is much the best poet of public affairs, called *Waiting For The Barbarians*, in which the inhabitants of a Greek city state turn up every morning at dawn at the city gates with the keys to wait for the barbarians to arrive, and they fail to show up, and as they go home in the evening muttering disappointedly to themselves, the citizens say, 'It's such a pity, because the barbarians were after all a kind of solution in their way'.

**And you were the barbarians...**

**'Power has insidious ways of curtailing one's sensitivities as a politician, starting with the fact that hardly any minister I know has a raincoat'**



I think what all of us have experienced in European councils is colleagues waiting for us to put the arguments for prosaicism, as it were, for practicality, and when we are less theatrically exposed they are going to find that they are having to put the arguments themselves. So our alleged intransigence, our cultural inclination to ask the 'Yes, but...' questions, came in very useful if you were from almost any other member state. I think the European issues will resolve themselves with rather less political hassle than a lot of people have supposed. For any of us who've been in government in the 80s, it's increasingly obvious and increasingly the case that you have to make large amounts of policy on the European Community stage.

The other issue which you mentioned was constitutional reform. I think that one starts by asking a Joad-like question, define your terms. If, for example, constitutional reform involves, among other things, trying to establish a more coherent view about the appropriate relationship, and the appropriate structure for that relationship, between local and central government, I totally agree with you. But I don't go much beyond that. I don't think people out there are burning for much more than that. It's an endlessly fascinating subject, particularly for politicians. But I'm not sure it gets them humming with excitement in the Dog and Duck.

**I'll come back to them in a minute if I may, but I must pursue you on Europe. After all, Mrs Thatcher would still be prime minister if it weren't for a lot of argument about Europe. So let me put it in a very simplistic way. There has been a view in this country for a long time, going back to the 1910s, that the European Community is essentially an association of sovereign states which co-operate together in certain fields but which retain their sovereignty. In essence it's a sort of free-trade area. There is another view, the prevailing view in the other Community countries, that it is, in some fundamental sense,\* a supranational organisation moving, in the words of the Rome Treaty, towards an ever-closer union. Now on which side of that divide do you locate yourself, and on which side of it do you think the Major government locates itself?**

I would allow the prime minister and the foreign secretary to speak for themselves, but I undoubtedly take the view that the Community is going to evolve into more than it is at the moment. But if you ask me precisely what that 'more' amounts to, I take some refuge in Cardinal Newman, 'I do not ask to see the distant scene, one step enough for me'. I also find it extremely difficult to know what people are talking about when they use expressions like union and quasi-federalism.

**Extending majority voting in the Council of Ministers, for example.**

There are arguments for doing that, provided you define subsidiarity more

closely. I began to find in the Environment Council that there were large numbers of issues on which qualified majority voting wouldn't have caused us very much difficulty, but on the other hand I would have wanted to define what it was that the Community should do appropriately first. There's a real and understandable reservation we have about some of the institutional arguments, precisely because of the institutional longevity which we enjoy here. There is hardly another member state which can point to institutions which have survived so long. Most other member states have seen their own democratic institutions either disrupted by internal revolution or authoritarianism during the last 40 or 50 years, or have been subject to invasion from an external power. And I think that gives us a real and different perception.

**But the question is, can our different perception be adapted to their perception, after all they are the majority and we are a minority, or are we going to stick to our different perception come what may, in which case the road ahead may well be rather bumpy?**

I think it may be bumpy, but I certainly wouldn't want us to surrender completely our own views about the best way of arranging democracy, and I don't think that any of the others would expect to surrender their own opinions on things which they regard as fundamental. So firstly, I don't necessarily accept your underlying argument that we are inevitably going to find ourselves in a punch-up with others on these matters. Secondly, it does seem to me that we've got some very legitimate arguments to make about institutional arrangements, and even though arguments about sovereignty can sound pretty hollow sometimes - and that's always been the case, it's one of those things which it's frightfully difficult to define in the abstract - nevertheless we have more practical ways of understanding its definitions than a lot of other countries.

**How about monetary union? The government is saying the hard ecu is a road towards a single currency, eventually, or maybe, but there must be no imposition of a single currency. That's a very elegant formulation which allows you to keep your options open for a long time to come. I think you'll find a lot of other people discovering that its elegance covers their positions too.**

**At the moment the Germans don't seem to like it too much.**

We'll see what happens in the IGC. The more people look at the proposals about the hard ecu, the more they seem to comprehend the points that we're trying to make and sympathise with them.

**But aren't you going to have to say that the final destination, in your view, is going to be a single currency?**

It may be, if that's what people choose.

**And you wouldn't go further than that, you wouldn't say: 'This is what we want it to be. We hope people will choose this'?**

No, because that begs so many questions of what else is in the parcel.

**Go on.**

I hope they'll choose it, which is what you're wanting me to say, but if I hope they choose it, what are the other things that I hope they're choosing as well? What are the degrees of convergence in the labour market between southern Portugal and northern Germany which they're buying?

**Can I go back to the other question which we touched on, that of constitutional reform. You said people in the Dog and Duck weren't very interested in this, and if I understood you correctly you said that the area where you thought something important could and should be done might be relations between central and local government, but you didn't really think anything else was terribly interesting and important. What about individual rights? There is now a quite substantial debate, not confined by any means to the Left or the centre Left, but including for example the IEA, which says that part and parcel of the Thatcher revolution of the 80s - which was about empowerment, or at least was sold as being about empowerment - must be the entrenchment of justiciable individual rights in the legal system. Do you have any time for that argument?**

I have some time for it as an interesting intellectual proposition. I don't think that it has very much political resonance at the moment. We've empowered people in numbers of ways, both through the extension of ownership and through the extension of rights and choice in the public sector. I don't myself think that we need to seek a bill of rights for the end of this century, but I'm fairly open-minded on the arguments. There is something I suspect you don't take sufficient account of in arguing about institutional reform. At the end of the 1970s, when institutional reform was a live issue both here and in the United States, I can remember going to the United States and people talking about the crisis of the presidency, people writing about the importance of changing the constitution in order to make it possible for the president to govern, and similar broad debates about institutional reform in this country. What those reflected was the fact that government had been inadequate, had failed - in this country most manifestly in relation to trade unions and economic decline. The fact that elections were fought about who governed the country, whether as an explicit constitutional question or in terms of who could best draw up a social contract with the unions, reflected that lack of ability of politicians to govern. The paradox is that two politicians, Reagan and Thatcher, who believe in small government, seem to have made government itself possible again, and to the extent that government has been

**'There's a feeling that we should be more explicit about the social responsibilities that should go with individualism'**



capable of dealing with issues in the 1980s, then I don't think that institutional reform is going to be as big an item in our in-trays as it was 10 or 15 years ago. Now maybe you're right to say that I'm missing something which is stirring in the shrubbery. I'm not convinced by that.

**It may not be stirring in the shrubbery, but it might nevertheless be the right thing. It's not always what stirs in the shrubbery that politicians need to do. But let me put the point a slightly different way round. You said a few moments ago that you hoped, and perhaps expected, the kinds of approaches that you've been describing to lead to another, longish period of Conservative rule and that John Major might be prime minister for quite some time... If we get it right.**

I think that's entirely possible myself. We then face a quite interesting question, not stirring in the shrubbery but at a higher sort of level. British politics have worked on the basis that governments are kept on their toes and made accountable to the public through the adversarial party system in which the opposition is quite likely to hold power at the next election through the swing of the pendulum. Now if we do have another Conservative victory in the next general election and maybe, goodness knows, even possibly a fifth one, this would be an extremely long period of one-party rule. We'd be getting almost to a Japanese-type political system. Given our constitution, our political culture, doesn't this have some worrying aspects for you?

**It has more worrying aspects if you're a Labour politician.**

**Obviously it does, but I'm asking you as a Conservative.**

What I was saying earlier about the responsibilities of being extrovert, of listening, of seeking to convert rather than assert in one's dealings, for instance with the massive non-governmental organisation sector, is perhaps one reflection of my concern that we should try, if we win, to avoid the arrogance of power. Power has insidious ways of curtailing one's sensitivities as a politician, starting with the fact that hardly any minister I know has a raincoat.

**So if ministers don't have raincoats, and they're going to have even fewer raincoats on the hypothesis of another Conservative victory, isn't the question then, might we not need some constitutional changes which will oblige them to have raincoats?**

First of all, I don't myself believe that we've seen the end of parliamentary reform. I was Norman St John Stevas's parliamentary private secretary when we set up the select committees, and I regard their development as one of the most important things that's happened in our political life. Speaking as a minister, the most intellectually interesting experiences I've had in parliament have been exchanges with select committees. It is incomparably more useful and interesting to spend two hours

answering the questions of a select committee rather than 45 minutes shouting clichés at the opposition, or having them shouted at you. There is more that we'll need to look at in terms of parliamentary reform, and people are starting to ask serious questions about the impact of our working hours on aspirant politicians. It is much more difficult for women to come in to our political structures because of the way we operate. It's outrageous. Secondly, we will need to look at the ways in which we refresh ourselves intellectually in the Conservative Party. We will need to look to ways in which we can build out of the Centre For Policy Studies and the research department here a genuine independent think-tank for the Conservative Party. I've always been a great admirer of the work of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and of the other political academies in Germany, which I think have helped make policy debate more informed and thorough and open than it's sometimes been in this country

**Can I ask a last question: you are expressing a view of politics which is quite close in all sorts of ways to christian democracy on the continent. Do you feel this is a rather exotic creed in the British Conservative Party, or do you feel yourself to be in the mainstream?**

No, I think I'd regard myself as being in the mainstream.

**It's pretty different from Thatcherism, isn't it?**

It may be partly a generational thing. If you were to put round the table Volker Ruhe and one or two of his colleagues in the German CDU, and Ken Clark, John Gummer, Tony Newton, and others, and me, apart from the fact that they'd probably speak English better, you'd often be hard-pressed to know which was which. Different perceptions about Europe, but partly because we start from different sets of political and personal experience. But I find myself very much at home talking to German Christian Democrats. It does seem to me that with notable effect they've constructed a political philosophy which works and delivers not only in terms of the prosperity which it helps to produce but also in terms of - to use a rather Christian Democrat word - the solidarity which it establishes. The story of Germany since the war, not only in terms of economic miracles, but also in terms of coping with their inheritance and establishing, with our help initially, institutions which are healthy and vibrant, is one of the outstanding success stories of parliamentary democracy anywhere. So I would hope that whatever else the future holds, working closely and successfully with other European politicians like that is at least part of the mix. And if in the process we can learn from them and they perhaps from time to time can learn from us, it's one of the better effects of being a part of the Community. •