

Too Close for Comfort?

*A leading British conservative wishes his country were
closer to its neighbors and farther from you-know-who.*

COUSINS AND STRANGERS

*America, Britain, and Europe
in a New Century.*

By Chris Patten.

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By **JOSEF JOFFE**

IF Europe had an Establishment, Chris Patten would be it. Now chancellor of Oxford, Patten was most recently the European Union's commissioner for external relations, and he might have run European foreign policy if the European Union actually had one. A baron and a Balliol graduate, he was a member of Parliament, chairman of the Tories and the last British governor of Hong Kong. He is a perfect exemplar of what the British call "the Great and the Good."

In this book — part memoir, part *cri de coeur* — we meet him in a new guise. Call it the "Good European," in both senses of the term. In the British context, he is a Europhile who wants Albion to be what it has never quite been: in, of and with Europe. On the trans-Atlantic stage (hence the title "Cousins and Strangers"), he is the Good European as New Man — chastened and reformed — who has seen the rest of the world and found it wanting. In a quiet, almost diffident voice that so distinguishes well-bred Britons from their French and German counterparts, Patten holds up Europe's moral-cultural authority against those unregenerates who would still insist on nationhood, sovereignty and force in international affairs.

At the top of the list are the usual suspects, Bushist America and Thatcherite Britain, but also add Tony Blair, a k a America's poodle, and the world's favorite bugaboo, Ariel Sharon (whose popularity soared miraculously after his coma). At the end, there aren't many lovable left. The president of France gets his comeuppance thus: "Is there any consistency or meaning to . . . Jacques Chirac's practice of French exceptionalism?" Patten demands to know. "Even when they are right, the French can be infuriatingly perverse or incomprehensible." One of his most elegant slashes is reserved for Blair: "A usually likable man," he "has convictions to which he holds strongly — while he holds them." And Gerhard Schröder, the former chancellor of Germany, "always gives the impression that the very short term is for him very long indeed."

No fan of Israel, Patten wasn't very fond either of Yasir Arafat, whose "baleful influ-

ence" was "far greater than his governing authority." By a rough count, there are only four people who make Patten's cut. One is John Major, Margaret Thatcher's successor — an "honest, generous, kindhearted . . . clever man." The other three are Nelson Mandela, Kofi Annan and Colin Powell — men who "best combine natural grace and authority." Make that: who best conform to the ideal of an English gentleman.

The prime target of Patten's rapier is American neoconservatives who "considered George H. W. Bush's policies, particularly his failure to topple Saddam Hussein, anemic and deficient in chutzpah." They "strongly supported" Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud Party and clamored for a rematch against Hussein. Why the Yiddish "chutzpah"? Why not "guts" or "resolve"? So that we would know who "they" are, those clever manipulators who had subverted the American national interest? Patten could not have meant Bush and Cheney, Rice and Rumsfeld, who probably don't even know what chutzpah is. At any rate, their world was "dangerous to us all because, in Edmund Burke's famous phrase, 'a great empire and little minds go ill together.'"

This is the backdrop against which Patten recites the gospel of the Good European: "Under American tutelage, we in Europe turned our back on the bellicose, nationalist politics of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and through our new modes of cooperation . . . are bent on coping with the problems of the 21st." Naturally, Patten also upholds Europe's social contract, which favors egalitarianism over full employment. Yes, "the U.S. economy has grown more rapidly than Europe's," he concedes, "but that is largely the result of America's 1 percent annual population growth." So why won't Old Europe put its 20 million unemployed to work? Patten also opines that America's faster productivity growth can be explained by "the Wal-Mart or Home Depot factor — large shopping sheds on out-of-town green-field sites." That spin on Europe's 10-year slump doesn't wash, either. Those "shopping sheds" blanket Europe, too, where they are called Carrefour (food) or Media Markt (electronics) or even, yes, Wal-Mart and Costco.

When it comes to Islam and terror, Patten for once loses his cool. So you Yanks want to remake the Middle East by force? "Damn it," he sputters, "this is our neighborhood," and therefore we know better, he all but shouts. Above all, you must ditch Samuel Huntington and his "clash of civilizations." For the Arabs are just like us: they "top the world in believing

that democracy is the best form of government." And they care most about "personal security, fulfillment and satisfaction." So whence Arab rage?

You guessed it: from the war in Iraq and "the betrayal and denial of Palestinian rights." This is a curiously foreshortened list. Does the Iraq war explain the unfathomable cruelty of Saddam Hussein before 2003 or even 1991? Does it explain the despotism and the deadly quarrels between sects, ideologies and regimes that preceded Israel's occupation in 1967? Does it explain the annihilation of the Syrian city of Hama by Hafez al-Assad's army in 1982? Or the economic backwardness that leaves so many young Arab men without a job and a future? Patten doesn't lay the blame for Islamist terrorism directly on the West. Ever so subtly, he indicts by posing questions: "Why does the West's notion of spreading freedom, capitalism and democracy look to some others like licentiousness, greed and a new colonialism?"

This is a flawed book, but *cris de coeur* always are. Patten's is also a brilliantly catty and nicely constructed text — so felicitous in its language and subtle in its jabs that one wishes for a bit more Oxbridge in America's top schools. If back in college they had been obliged to deliver two essays per week, American mandarins might sound more like Patten and less like PowerPoint. In Oxford, they teach you not only to write well but also to think beyond the talking points of the day, and this is why the standard prejudices of the

Good European do not overwhelm his intelligence, erudition and wit.

Though it ranges across the planet, the book is addressed to America. Though it takes an uncharitable view of the Bushies, as well as of all things American that European conservatives have always found distasteful, the book ends up with a kind of homage to the United States. "We are too inclined," he writes, "to criticize America while depending on its security shield; too prone to advocate multilateralism while knowing that if a multilateral solution requires force nothing much is likely to happen unless America is involved." The boys who went to a *grande école* would rather bite off their tongues than concede this incontrovertible point to the yahoos *américains*.

So cousins after all? Well, yes, if you Yanks learned a bit from the wiser ways of Europe, Patten writes in his last paragraph. Then, the century ahead will be "dominated by the values that American history enshrines and that American leadership at its best embodies and defends without bragging or blustering: democracy, pluralism, enterprise and the rule of law." It doesn't quite jibe with the preceding 292 pages, but who's counting? □

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