

THE ABDICATOR

ON THE RETIREMENT OF VÁCLAV HAVEL FROM POLITICAL LIFE

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In recent weeks, here on the western shores of Europe, foreign news desks have been reporting that the Czech polity is having trouble appointing a new president. The news unfortunately feeds a hungry prejudice of outside observers about central Europe : too many parties, a weak capacity for compromise, the lack of bold, far-sighted leadership, they complain. The claim contains grains of truth, all the while ignoring the most basic and interesting point : the difficulty of replacing Václav Havel is partly his own doing. By clinging to the role of president for too long – four presidencies, in two countries, for thirteen years – he not only behaved sometimes as if he wore a crown. He also limited the capacity of the Czech polity to produce new, young, ‘fresh blood’ leaders. That in turn helped to produce the present abdication crisis.

In English – in contrast to Czech - the words ‘abdication crisis’ have strong connotations. They describe the power vacuum that opens up when a monarch leaves office, or suddenly dies, so leaving behind a trail of confusion about his or her lucky successor. To implicate Havel in the current succession problem – which has to be resolved by the parliament during the next thirty days – is not to demean his great political achievements, in the broadest sense. Václav Havel will be remembered as a man who had the misfortune of being born into the twentieth century, a man whose fate was politics, a man – especially before 1989 - who won fame as the political figure who taught the world much more about power, the powerful and the powerless than most of his contemporary rivals.

Since the revolution his political achievements have been considerable. He was the first and firmest champion of honest and fair-minded reconciliation with Germany

over the Sudeten question. His long-standing wish for entry into the European Union is about to be granted. Impatient with lumpish Czechocentrism, Havel courageously defended principles like open-mindedness, toleration and civility – especially towards humiliated groups like the Romany. He wrote and delivered many fine public speeches on the great questions of our time : globalisation, the environment, peace, war. He sometimes had the courage to associate himself with unpopular causes – as in recent days, by declaring his support for American and British efforts to unseat Saddam Hussein by means of war, if necessary. And at home, unusually, Havel consistently spoke the language of civil society and championed its plural causes. He correctly foresaw that the transition to parliamentary democracy and a market economy could not succeed unless the Czechs built a solid foundation of non-governmental institutions - institutions that nurtured, from below, kindness, co-operation, equality and freedom.

So let the world praise these political successes. But let nobody fall for the myth, which is still kept alive by some journalists, that puts Václav Havel on a pedestal, side-by-side with the Pope or other great European and world figures. Democracies should not immortalise their leaders. They should try to live without political myths. That is why my *Václav Havel : A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* [in Czech translation as *Politická tragédie v šesti dějstvích*] was written as an interrogation of the subject of power. It probed Havel's life in terms of the themes of power and power-sharing, hubris and powerlessness. It favourably contrasted his great courage and radical honesty before 1989 with the tendency towards pride and hubris and political arbitrariness of the presidencies that followed.

It was perhaps because the biography called into question the myth that Havel was a 'natural born' democrat that trouble erupted. The book sold well (just how well I don't exactly know : despite repeated requests, the Czech publisher has never issued sales figures, perhaps to avoid the payment of royalties!). Some reviewers were irritated. Quite a few Czech intellectuals, unused to playing a public role, reacted sheepishly. Havel's hard-core fans were offended by the book's realism. Havel himself broke off all communications with me. 'Tabloid journalism', he reportedly said, confirming in the next breath that he hadn't yet read the book, and didn't intend to do so. I was neither shocked nor surprised by the arrogance. My scholarly research efforts had convinced me of a live contradiction within his years as president : the

substance of Havel's presidential achievements was often at odds with the institutional *procedures* he favoured when pushing them through.

The examples are still unfamiliar to many. Shortly after the revolution, for instance, there was Havel's abstract preaching against economists and the workings of market economies. And the important moment when Havel fell foul of the country's leading constitutional lawyer, Zdeněk Jičínský, plus a majority within the Federal Assembly, which handed Havel his first political defeat after he tried to change the name of the country, alter its coat of arms, and rename its armed forces by a show of hands. Then there was his dislike of political parties, whose rise he did everything he could to stifle. 'How would you react to this idea?', he said to an embarrassed Chancellor Kohl during the first seconds of their first meeting. 'Why don't we work together to dissolve all political parties? Why don't we set up just one big party : the Party of Europe?' The disastrous attempt, from the summer of 1991, to preserve the undemocratic Czechoslovak constitution by appealing over the heads of institutions to 'the people' through a referendum, should also not be forgotten.

Havel's rather undemocratic efforts to crown the Czechoslovak republic fortunately backfired. The transition from communism helped awaken all sorts of critics and opponents – journalists included - who slowly but surely succeeded in humbling him as a maverick political animal. So why then did he continue to cling for so long to the institution of the presidency that eventually - ironically - weakened his reputation among Czechs and Slovaks? Why, despite growing unpopularity, did he hang on until the bitter end?

Some say that he was cocooned by poor advice from the shrinking circle of old mates who minded him at the Prague castle. The courtiers' spin neither worked nor helped much, it's true. But Havel had certainly been warned of the dangers of acting like a monarch, for instance by his good friend, Adam Michnik. 'Vašek,' he said when Havel was waiting to become first president of the Czech Republic, 'it's all very well riding high on applause and acclamation. But what will you do, how will you feel, when the clapping stops and the hissing and heckling begins?' That was a good question. It didn't get an answer for the reason that Havel's wife Olga once explained.

‘He adores it!’, she said over coffee to a good friend, Josef Topol, a year into his first presidency. ‘He’ll never give it up!’

Olga was right. Pretences to the contrary, power was for Havel an aphrodisiac. It was supplied by two key sources. Oddly, one of them was the mantra of ‘living in the truth’. From the time of the Thirty-Sixers right up to and including the key role he played in the formation and brave defence of Charta 77, Havel perfected the arts of politics from below. Striking direct deals, making personal compromises, manipulating others were his trademark. These arts were a vital feature of what he called ‘living in the truth’. They enabled him to survive the miserable years of Stalin and Brezhnev. They demonstrated the power of the powerless. But as president these arts caused him trouble and bred opposition. Figures who were close to him – figures as different as Václav Klaus and Jan Urban - spotted his bad habit of confusing and conflating the different roles of ‘dissident’ and president.

That bad habit was one reason why Havel initially gave such low priority to the reform of governmental institutions, especially those whose reshaping would have had power-sharing, democratic effects. His neglect of institutions was succoured by the privileges of presidential life. Havel persistently treated his office at the Castle as a stage. He was the ambitious playwright and single-minded director of a long-running performance. It featured himself as *Ichspieler* – as the good king personified, at centre stage. The tone was set by the first redesigns of the Castle : the fleet of red, white and blue BMWs, the Festival of Democracy in the summer of 1990, the t-shirts and blue jeans, the arrival of Lou Reed and the Rolling Stones, the ‘authorised biography’ of Eda Kriseová. The performance culminated last November in his final political triumph : playing host at the lavish NATO summit that agreed (despite tomato-throwing and street demonstrations) to widen membership to include countries from the former Soviet Union.

Havel’s taste for pomp and ceremony had little affinity with parliamentary democracy, but tomorrow and the day after it will not much matter. The clock is ticking. Havel will have gone – abdicated, if you will. The crisis will be resolved. The lucky successor – thanks ironically to Havel’s efforts to secure Czech entry into the EU - will perform their role much more humbly than anytime since 1989. Caught up

in the nets of cross-border politics, he or she will no longer be able to act like a monarch. She will instead resemble a humble state governor somewhere within the American republic. And Havel himself? Health permitting, after a rest, he will be forced to craft a wholly different public role than dissident or president. With a little luck, historians will note that his activities were comparable to the role of wise critic of government and society played by former political leaders like Nelson Mandela and Pierre Trudeau. If that were to happen, then it would certainly be a good thing for both Czechs and the rest of Europe. For it would confirm an important lesson of the past thirteen years : that the first principle of democratic politics is that nobody should sit on thrones, that power, wherever and by whomever it is exercised, must always be checked, balanced and toughly criticised, even when that produces political offence.