



**PRIME MINISTER**

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
PRESENTATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF  
JEWISH AFFAIRS HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD  
TO MR ALEXANDER DUBCEK, PRESIDENT OF THE  
FEDERAL ASSEMBLY OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
MELBOURNE - APRIL 28 1991**

Alexander Dubcek,  
Isi Leibler  
Members of the Institute  
Friends

Tonight we are honoured by the presence of a man who, in his life and in his work, reflects the great struggle of our Century - the struggle against tyranny and suppression of the human spirit.

His presence here among us tonight exemplifies three things:

- . his own victory after a long and hard struggle against dictatorship;
- . the victory of his country, whose turbulent history has been so tragically typical of this Century and its problems; and
- . the huge international changes in which his struggle, and the struggle of his nation, have played a decisive part.

Alexander Dubcek is a man who embodies the enduring commitment of his people to freedom; who represents the triumphant emergence, after decades of repression, of free democracies throughout Eastern Europe; and who personifies the resolute determination of principled individuals to achieve the victory of the human spirit over the powerful forces of authoritarianism.

Tonight, by presenting him with the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs' human rights award, we honour Alexander Dubcek: leader of the Prague Spring of 1968; symbol of the humiliation and repression that followed for two decades; and inspiration for the peaceful revolution that has built a new and democratic government.

I had the honour of receiving this award in 1988, an occasion I remember vividly, because of the spirit of hope and optimism in which we celebrated the release of a number of Jewish 'refuseniks' from the Soviet Union after my visit in 1987.

Yet in 1988, as we were celebrating those first tangible signs of the break-up of the Stalinist monolith, few of us had in mind the speed with which this transition would occur, or the degree to which change would sweep throughout the whole of Central and Eastern Europe.

Of course it is easy to say, in hindsight, that the internal contradictions of the Eastern bloc regimes would eventually lead to their own downfall.

It was not so easy then. We had become accustomed to the ruthless resilience of the old regimes; we had seen hopes raised and hopes dashed before; we had learned not to expect rapid change, or even significant positive change, on such a broad scale.

Of course there is still much to be done. Democracy has not spread fully throughout the nations of Eastern Europe; economic reform and development remains a huge challenge throughout the region, and we must all understand that this will inevitably bring dislocation, disruption and pain before prosperity. And the future of the Soviet Union itself remains unresolved.

Yet there is much that we can celebrate - and to be able tonight to welcome in our midst Alexander Dubcek, now President of the Czechoslovak Parliament, is a vindication of our support for the democratic freedom of the people of Central and Eastern Europe, a triumph for the cause of international human rights, and we hope a favourable augury for the future of the region.

The events in Eastern Europe since 1989 should leave us in no doubt that the process of transforming the central command systems of the Eastern bloc is now irreversible.

Nor should we be in any doubt that these changes are a fundamental victory for human rights.

Friends

The urge for political and economic freedom is impossible to extinguish.

The maintenance of obedience through repression, wherever it occurs, is ultimately unsustainable.

The history of the Czech and Slovak people bears ample testimony to this.

In 1968 Alexander Dubcek, responding to the demands of his people, set about building a society based on the principles of democracy and social justice. His commitment to "socialism with a human face" made him the driving force of the reforms which led to the "Prague Spring".

But his initiative was smashed on the anvil of the Brezhnev doctrine and his leadership was crushed by Warsaw Pact forces invading and occupying his country.

The extinction of that season of hope was followed by many years of national anguish, frustration and stagnation. During that time many citizens were subject to harassment and humiliation. Hundreds - such as Vaclav Havel - were jailed for their stand or were forced to seek asylum overseas. Alexander Dubcek himself was to endure 20 years of humiliation and isolation.

But the spirit of freedom lived on in the hearts of the Czech and Slovak people.

It was a spirit which Alexander Dubcek profoundly understood.

In replying to those who wished to destroy the gains of the Prague spring, Alexander Dubcek made one of the most telling statements about the ruling Communist party.

Let me quote his words: The party, he said, "cannot impose its authority, but must constantly acquire it by its actions. It cannot force its line by orders, but by the work of its members and the veracity of its ideals."

In asserting that political authority must be earned and not imposed, Alexander Dubcek was stating a universal truth. In making that point he was speaking not only for those who had struggled before him for political freedom in Czechoslovakia, but for all of those who were to continue to campaign for freedom in Eastern Europe to this day.

The spontaneous outpourings of support that occurred throughout Czechoslovakia in 1968 made it clear that Alexander Dubcek and his government - and the ideals they promoted - had his peoples' support.

In the optimistic days of the Prague spring, Alexander Dubcek's leadership was crucial. Now over two decades later his leadership is again an inspiration to his people. It is a fitting tribute to his support throughout Czechoslovak society that he was, once again, to stand with them throughout their "velvet revolution" of 1989.

The people of Czechoslovakia are now embarking on a period of constitutional and economic reform as they make the important transition towards a market system based on the fundamental tenets of democratic pluralism. That will not be a painless process.

But through it, I am confident that we are witnessing the emergence of a new and stronger Czechoslovak society - one which will ensure that Czechoslovakia can take a respected place in Europe once more and can become a strong and independent actor on the world stage.

#### Friends

Now is the time for us to rebuild bridges between East and West and in doing so to rediscover links which for too long have been broken.

For many this transition has taken on an intensely personal dimension. Hundreds of thousands of Australians retain family connections with Eastern Europe.

For them the political changes in Eastern Europe bring new opportunities and a chance to renew old bonds. For many it will be an opportunity to revisit their homeland - a simple wish which for many has long been denied.

For the Government it is also a time to renew official links and to begin the task of developing a network of relations with these countries.

This process is now well under way. We are developing political links, and helping to foster market economies.

#### Friends

The shape of the emerging international order depends on replacing the confrontation of the post-war era with a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation.

Czechoslovakia has been much in our thoughts in recent months. Fifty-three years ago, the world allowed Czechoslovakia to be condemned to oblivion as 'a small nation far from here of which we know little'. Out of this unprincipled weakness the world came to witness some of the most unimaginable horrors in history. No one understands that tragedy better than the Jewish people.

The world recently faced a similar challenge in the Gulf, and to its great and enduring credit, showed that it had learned the lesson of Czechoslovakia; that freedom must be defended everywhere, and aggression must be everywhere opposed.

In 1968, Czechoslovakia taught the world another lesson, perhaps equally important - that military power is no substitute for moral authority. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was a military victory, but it was a moral defeat from which the old Soviet Union never recovered. I am sure historians will judge that the collapse of communism as a major ideological force became inevitable after the crushing of the Prague Spring. The victory, then, is yours, Alexander Dubcek.

By your stature and your achievements, your career has transcended the personal and national sphere to have truly international significance. We honour you for it.

I welcome you to Australia, and I join with Australia's Jewish Community in paying this tribute to you. It is richly deserved.

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