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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
LUNCHEON IN HONOUR OF PRESIDENT VACLAV HAVEL OF THE
CZECH REPUBLIC, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA
TUESDAY 28 MARCH 1995**

It is a great pleasure to welcome you here to Australia as the President of the Czech Republic.

And it is a double pleasure to welcome you here in your own right.

In other words, for who you are as well as who you represent.

You are, of course, a very well known figure in Australia, as the public interest in your visit here shows.

Because, despite our very different history and geography, Australians have long watched with sympathy and concern the struggle of the Czech people against the terrible varieties of repression which have afflicted Europe this century.

And in recent years we have watched with admiration as you and your colleagues fought a tyrannical system, with great personal courage, without moral compromise.

And we rejoiced when finally, remarkably, in one of the happiest events of the century, you brought that system tumbling down in the 'velvet revolution'.

The critical act for any Government or people is the act of imagining.

That has been one of your great contributions to your people, even at times when what you were imagining must have seemed unattainable.

Yesterday, I received from the distinguished Australian novelist and poet Rodney Hall these remarks.

"Vaclav Havel has contributed greatly to world literature.

Through his plays he speaks out courageously, with warmth, tolerance and good humour. They take us straight to the heart of the matter and involve us in the middle of situations we feel we already know to be the truth - yet this is the truth shown in a totally new light.

He gives us chunks of life, cut from their context with a scalpel, and set up in the limelight - as a medical sample might be put under the microscope. It is art at the threshold of being the very life it reflects.

Vaclav Havel can be funny and tragic in the same breath (this is a rare and enviable talent) revealing a comic side to the tyranny of closed minds. As his audience, we come out of the theatre energized, convinced that we can do something about society and the way we are, which is a mark of exceptional quality."

Mr President,

Your essays, lectures, letters, and other writings are among the most vivid, sustained and searching explorations of moral and political responsibility produced anywhere in the world.

At the heart of what you have written is your belief, as you have said, that 'Society can be enriched and cultivated only through self-knowledge, and the main instrument of society's self-knowledge is its culture.'

This truth is just as relevant to Australia - in our different hemisphere, and with our different history - as to Europe, as we address the task here of creating a tolerant, diverse, inclusive society - open to the world, but true to our sense of ourselves.

Central to this has been the issue of righting the dispossession of Australia's indigenous inhabitants.

You are, I am told, the first state visitor from Europe ever to ask for an official program which includes the culture of Aboriginal Australians. That is a matter of pride and pleasure for us.

Throughout your life, moral and intellectual accomplishments have been fused with a deep understanding of and concern for the lives and welfare of ordinary people.

If I may say so, these are just the sort of qualities a President should have.

Professor Robert Manne told the readers of the Melbourne Age last week that Czechs 'will eventually count as a singular blessing that their first President after the stale nightmare of communism, was a man of tolerance, taste, humour, curiosity, courage and honour'.

I am sure this view is shared by all Australians who have met you.

Mr President,

The timing of this visit to Australia could not be better.

It was inevitable that the uncertainty which followed the 1989 revolution in Czechoslovakia would lead initially to a decline in our trade and commercial relations as old patterns changed.

But that same event has created the strong base from which we can build a much closer relationship.

Already our trade and investment links are growing.

Australian businesses such as Brambles, Coca Cola Amatil, ADI, Pioneer Concrete, Bowral, Mincon and Blackhill Minerals are trying to build their operations in the Czech Republic.

There is no doubt we can be doing more together.

I made the point to European and Australian business people during a recent visit to Germany and the Netherlands that Australia's closer engagement with Asia, which has been at the core of this Government's approach to foreign policy, is not something we pursue at the expense of good relations with Europe.

On the contrary, we are convinced that the more directly and fully involved Australia is with the countries of our own region, the more relevant, the more productive, our links with Europe will be.

And beyond the commercial and economic relationship, I know there are opportunities for Australia and the Czech Republic to develop closer ties in cultural and social areas

Australia has benefited enormously from our association with the Czech people.

Directly, of course, from the thousands of Czechs who have made Australia their home and who have made such a valuable contribution to our national life - to our manufacturing and mining industries in particular, to the professions.

And to the arts. A Czech, Eduard Boravansky, was the father of the Australian ballet; Rudy Koman was almost as seminal a figure as a patron of Australian contemporary art; Czech musicians have been made a disproportionately large contribution to Australian music.

But we have also benefited indirectly from what the Czech people have given the world - from your musicians like Dvorak, Janacek, Smetana; and writers like Hasek, Kundera - and Havel.

Mr President,

You have paid us a great tribute by coming to Australia, and by your interest in our country and our culture.

I hope that over these few days you, Mrs Havlova and your party can take from Australia experiences which will live with you, as your words and experiences - and those of the Czech people - live with us.

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