



*Citation of*  
**Václav Havel**  
*for the degree of Doctor of Literature (honoris causa)*  
**31 March 1995**

Chancellor,

Thirty years ago, cyclostyled copies of plays by Václav Havel were circulated and read in this University's drama department. Not much else was known about their author, other than that he was a Czech. Presumably he had worked in a brewery, from the setting of one of the plays. Certainly he knew the follies of bureaucracy, and marvellously satirised its officialese in his now classic play, *The Memorandum*. As he himself has said, 'the deeper the experience of absurdity, the more energetically meaning is sought'. It is that relentless energy in pursuing meaning, in insisting that purpose and clarity are the end of politics as much as they are of art, that has made the author of those plays a major figure in recent European history.

President Havel's story, as he would insist, is in many ways that of so many other Czechs, and so many Europeans. It is a story of refusal, and to use one of his favourite words, of risk. The refusal to accept what exists as absolute, to accept theory as practice, to acknowledge force as privileged. To refuse such things is to risk, and to endure, the various strategies of repression, from censorship to imprisonment. His own prolific writings at each stage of this story – his dramatic texts, his essays, his prison letters, his interviews, his speeches – all bear continuing witness to an abiding faith: that to be an intellectual matters, that minds cannot be forced to march in step. To quote, as he himself does, the philosopher Václav Belohradsky, 'the most intrinsic role of the intellectual is not allowing himself to be corralled into histories written by the victors'.

If it is now as a political figure that President Havel is best known to us, if his name at once brings to mind those vividly resonant phrases 'Charter 77' and 'Civic Forum,' and is inseparable from the recent achievements of his country, his voice continues to carry a ring that is distinctively his own. For there is no end to vigilance, no end, as he has put it, to 'the obligation to act independently, freely, reasonably, quickly'. His declared presidential programme 'is to bring into politics a sense of culture, of moral responsibility, of humanity, of hu-

mility and respect for the fact that there is something higher above us'. Here, we may say, is the intellectual as committed man of action, the politician as moral force. As he has told the Council of Europe, 'We don't dream just because our dreams might come in handy. We dream as a matter of principle'.

Václav Havel is not a man to accept conventional divisions between his various roles as intellectual, as playwright, as politician. It is the nature of theatre to operate within political space. 'It is the only genre', he has said, 'in which, today and everyday, living human beings address and speak to other human beings ... a point at which the intellectual and spiritual life of the human community crystallises'. The theatre is synonymous with freedom. And if art and democracy derive from the same source, from that essential individual freedom, the intellectual's brief is to safeguard both, to ensure the vitality of public dialogue. For these are the attributes of that 'civil society' which has always been the President's aim. Where it does not exist the intellectual, the artist, the political activist, are the natural allies for its restoration. To maintain that open society is an ongoing pursuit; to refute its enemies is a matter of alert critique, of intelligence, of existential risk.

Victoria University honours that rare and courageous perseverance, that commitment to what, in speaking of his illustrious Czech forebear, the renaissance humanist Comenius, the President called 'the paradise of the heart', the immediate reality of the single human being, over whom no ideology, no theory, no system, may presume to take precedence.

Chancellor, it gives me great pleasure to present to you, Václav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, for the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*, in this University.

*Life Membership of the Victoria University of Wellington Students Association was then conferred on Dr Václav Havel, presented by its President, Paul Gibson. The New Zealand String Quartet then played the Lento and Finale from Dvorák's String Quartet in F Major, Op 96.*