

## **PEN International deeply saddened by death of Václav Havel – a constant champion for freedom of expression**

**18 December 2011**

Václav Havel, dissident playwright and poet, honorary president of Czech PEN and statesman, who died on 18 December 2011 aged 75, will be remembered by all at PEN for his remarkable contribution to literature and his outstanding commitment to freedom of expression.

“Václav Havel was the most courageous fighter for the freedom of speech. He trusted and believed in the ‘power of the powerless’ in the most democratic sense. So many spiritual seeds were planted by him all over the world. He changed the paradigm of global society with his fight for democracy and freedom of speech.” - International Secretary of PEN International, Hori Takeaki

In 1994, Václav Havel, then President of the Czech Republic, addressed the Prague World Congress of PEN International saying:

“Let us admit that most of us writers feel an essential aversion to politics. By taking such a position, however, we accept the perverted principle of specialization, according to which some are paid to write about the horrors of the world and human responsibility and others to deal with those horrors and bear the human responsibility for them.”

Marian Botsford Fraser, Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee, was at the Congress in Prague and recalls an extraordinary meeting attended by writers such as Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Günter Grass and Havel himself. She remembers his call to PEN members to do “something less conspicuous...create...if I may use the word, a somewhat conspiratorial mafia whose aim is not just to write marvellous books or occasional manifestos, but to have an impact on politics and its human perceptions in a spirit of solidarity...to help open its eyes.”

Havel's spirit of solidarity remained constant. One bitterly cold day in the first week of January, 2010, Václav Havel, and two of his fellow dissidents walked down a snow-edged street in Prague to deliver a letter to the Chinese Ambassador. Surrounded by a crowd of journalists and photographers, they rang the bell several times. No one came to the door, so they left their letter in the letterbox.

The letter from Havel and his friends, co-signatories of Charter 77, requested a fair and open trial for the Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo, sentenced on December 25, 2009 to 11 years for being the co-author of Charter 08. It said, “...We are convinced that this trial and harsh sentence meted out to a ...prominent citizen of your country merely for thinking and speaking critically about various political and social issues was chiefly meant as a stern warning to others not to follow his path.”

Vaclav Havel himself chose, despite threats and imprisonment, to speak out, to take a path of conscience and commitment to freedom of speech. He was an inspirational and remarkable man; his legacy – and spirit of solidarity - is a gift to us all.

Our thoughts are with his wife Dagmar, all his friends and family and with our colleagues in Czech PEN at this time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. McVeigh', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Laura McVeigh  
Executive Director  
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