



Introduction by  
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For years to come British feelings about the Czech Republic will continue to be tinged with a sadness and regret about what happened in their country in the 20th century. Czechoslovakia was the only East European country to remain a parliamentary democracy from 1918 to 1938. After the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain wrongly supposed at Munich that he could trust Hitler's word, Czechoslovakia was swallowed up in the Nazi empire. After a brief rebirth of democracy in 1945 the Czechs lost their freedom again to the Soviet Empire. It is a tragic story which we must not forget.

Because of this we in Britain have taken particular pleasure in the flowering of Czech democracy and Czech society since the collapse of Communism. President Havel became for all of us the embodiment of what could be achieved with patient bravery. He appealed not just to Czech nationalism but to the whole ideal of an intelligent civilised and peaceful Europe.

We warmly welcomed the Czech Republic into NATO in 1999 and into the European Union in 2004. As was to be expected the Czechs have not been passive members of either organisation, or of the wider international community. The Czechs have troops and civilian units in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo. The future of the European Union is discussed almost as volubly in the Czech Republic as in Britain. President Klaus ranks as one of the foremost critics in Europe

of the bureaucratic centralising tendencies which he sees in Brussels. This has not prevented the Czechs (any more than the British) from playing a vigorous part in the work of Europe.

There need to be practical discussions between the two governments about one of the main tasks now facing Europe, namely the completion of a coherent and united European policy towards our Russian neighbour. For too long the leaders of Western Europe have put their faith in fragmented and ineffective individual approaches to Moscow. The growing influence of our new Eastern partners in the EU, certainly including the Czech Republic, should enable us to think coolly and calmly about the long term relationship, in particular its components of security and energy.

Under the present (in my view outdated) system by which the Presidency of the European Union changes every six months, the Czech Republic will be in charge of the Presidency in the first half of 2009. The smaller members of the European Union have often been more effective in the Presidency than the big ones. That particular Presidency will be of crucial importance in testing the new machinery for running the EU, and moving forward from these institutional discussions to tackling the fundamental problems which we and our children face as Europeans. We can be confident that, given proper support by the rest of us, the Czechs will guide us successfully through the transition. **F**