

English College in Prague – Graduation Ceremony 29 May 2026

It's an honour and a privilege to have been asked to speak and take part in such an important event in all of your lives. I have the highest admiration for the English College in Prague and for its founders - two great figures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the now King of the United Kingdom, HM Charles III and the first President of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel, a man whose principles and courage inspired me and countless others across the world as a teenager and a young man.

Although this is a far grander and more august occasion, today reminds me of Prize Days at my school. You'd sit through all the prizes being awarded to other people and then some boring old man would stand up and drone on for 20 minutes. I now realise that I have become that boring old man, but I promise you I'll be done in less than 10 minutes.

Almost all the prizes being awarded today are named after accomplished people in their fields – the Sir Tom Stoppard Prize for Drama; the Alan Turing Prize for Computer Science; the Sir Roger Scruton Prize for Philosophy. Great men whose work and thought has shaped our lives and strengthened the power of the individual over the State.

But for me, the highlight of today's programme will be the performance of Somewhere Over the Rainbow sung by Araelie Linda Crosby. It's a song I know well. As you will all know it's from the musical The Wizard of Oz. When I was 17, I played the Scarecrow, the character who thinks he has no brain, in a production at my school. The Scarecrow sings about all the great things he would think about if he only had a brain. The Wizard of Oz, when we finally meet him, reveals that the

Scarecrow does in fact have a brain; that the cowardly lion is in fact brave and the tin man does have a heart – if only they had the confidence to realise it. A lesson for life.

You'll see from the programme that I'm a Conservative, not someone naturally inclined to take part in protest marches. In my life I've only been on two – one was ten years ago in Chichester to fight the closure of our local hospital. The first was in 1978 when I was 17, joining a huge march in London to mark the tenth anniversary of the Prague Spring. We were protesting against the repression and terror of the Soviet Union and in support of great and brave men like Vaclav Havel.

The Communist regime that ran Czechoslovakia before 1989 enforced an inward-looking country. It was in the interests of the state to prevent its citizens from seeing the world and the freedoms enjoyed by so many nations beyond the Iron Curtain.

This school was established as the antithesis of that – your school's mission was to create internationally-minded students with liberal democratic values and with an international, global outlook.

One of the things that I felt very strongly about in my teenage years was the right of people to be able to make their own decisions, free from the over-bearing power of the State.

People like Vaclav Havel who were demanding this right in this country and across the Soviet bloc were heroes to people like me in the West.

His example inspired me and other young Conservatives, to help dissidents in Soviet Russia by smuggling in letters – travelling to what was then the city of Leningrad with letters hidden in my boots and then to mail the letters in post boxes

around the city. Looking back to that time in 1982 I now realise what a risk that was.

But this mild risk of my Western comfort was less than nothing compared to the courage of Vaclav Havel and many, many others who risked their lives and were imprisoned because they had the courage to speak out. Who, to use Havel's memorable phrase, insisted on "Living in Truth" (*Život v pravdě*), and who refused to go along with the lies, rituals and hypocrisies of an oppressive system. As a result of their conviction and determination, the Czech Republic is now a proud, free and influential member of Nato and a major European country.

To be a student at the school President Havel founded is a privilege and a responsibility that I know all the students here understand. For those of you who graduate this year, you will be able to look back on a school career that has given you a firm basis of knowledge across a wide area of academic disciplines. You have been taught to use this knowledge to think critically about the subjects you have studied and to draw lessons for the challenges of our times. For much of the last twenty years, I have spent my life seeking to ensure that England's school system puts knowledge at its core because knowledge gives us the power to think critically, to challenge, to live in truth.

To those of you who are leaving to go onto university or to the next phase of your life, I wish you the very best. You have the privilege of having received a fine education. It's now for you to shape the world around you and as you do so remember what you have been taught here and always always live in truth.