

The Crisis of Leadership in an Era of 'Interregnum': Reflections on Politics in the Light of Václav Havel's Departure

A few days ago,¹ hundreds of thousands, perhaps more than a million people took to the streets and public squares of Prague to bid farewell to Václav Havel, according to many observers, the last great political-cum-spiritual leader (spiritual, in great measure, thanks to his political greatness, and political, in great measure, thanks to his spiritual greatness), the likes of whom we are unlikely to witness again in our lifetime. What we are unlikely to witness either are comparable numbers of people prompted to take to the streets by their gratitude and respect for a statesman, rather than by their wholesale indignation, resentment and derision for people in power and the politics 'as we know it'. In their farewell to Havel, the mourners bewailed a political leader who in sharp distinction from the political operators of today gave power to the powerless, instead of stripping them of whatever shreds of power they might have retained.

Havel was one of those few—ever fewer and further between—political/spiritual leaders who single-handedly challenged, and to an enormous effect, the irony and derision with which the capacity of an individual to change the course of events has been all too often treated by the learned as much as by popular opinion. Future historians would most probably place the name of Václav Havel on the list of great individuals who 'made a difference'—without whom the world would not and could not be like the world we've inherited. Historians would perhaps confirm as well the fearful anticipations of millions of mourners felt bereaved by Havel's departure, adding to that name the designation of 'the last in the line of the great political leaders who shaped the world we inhabit'. Bidding farewell to Havel, most of us—including our present-day appointed/elected leaders (however reluctant they may be to admit it)—have all the right and all the duty to look at themselves as dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants, of whom Václav Havel was, undoubtedly, one of the greatest. We look around in vain for those giants' successors—and we do it in a time when we need them yet more than ever before in our collective memory.

Havel left us at a time when people at the head of state governments, even the governments of the so-called powerful states, are looked upon with a steadily rising dose of irony and disbelief. The trust in the ability of the extant political institutions to influence the course of history, let alone to control or change it if required, is dwindling. The trust in politics as such has been set afloat by the repeated sightings of the government's impotence—and thus far it seeks in vain

¹ This text was written in December 2011.

a safe haven fit for mooring and casting an anchor. It is ever clearer that the inherited network of political institutions can no longer deliver, whereas a new toolbox for effective collective action is, at the utmost, at a designing stage, unlikely to be put soon into production or even recognised as worthy of being produced.

The growing and ever more likely to be incurable weakness of the extant executive powers has been long noted. It is too blatantly displayed to be overlooked. Heads of the most powerful governments meet on Friday to debate and draw the right line of action to take, only to wait, trembling, till the Monday stock exchange reopening to find out whether their decision has a leg to stand on. Indeed, the present state of interregnum is not of a recent birth, not very recent at any rate. Its ever more obtrusive presence has been not just signalled, but recognised and reflected years ago by the growing deficit of trust in the established vehicles of collective action, by falling interest in institutionalised politics, and by the relentlessly spreading and already widespread, indeed ambient sentiment that salvation, were it at all conceivable, would not and/or could not arrive from on high. We may add that the drivers and conductors of the above-mentioned vehicles, whether acting singly or severally, have for a long time been doing everything imaginable to set that trust afloat by denying and discrediting merits of acting-in-common, and to keep trust un-anchored—by admonishing, nagging and nudging men and women far and wide that, even if suffered in common, their shared problems have nevertheless thoroughly individual causes, and therefore can and should be individually faced and tackled and individually, through the use of individual means, resolved.

With ever-more-evident social divisions seeking in vain a political structure in which they could reflect themselves, as well as the political tools capable of servicing that reflection, the paramount, well-nigh defining trait of the state of 'interregnum' (namely, its tendency to allow almost anything to happen, yet nothing to be accomplished with any degree of self-assurance or certainty of results) may well manifest itself with a yet unprecedented force and magnitude of consequence. Alliances collated in the phase of ground-clearing (rainbow-like coalitions of otherwise incompatible interests, notoriously inclined to dissipate shortly after the outpour that put them in place comes to a halt) may well fall promptly apart or even explode, uncovering—for everybody to see—the truth of their ad hoc, marriage-of-convenience nature. The ground-clearing phase has no need for strong leaders: quite on the contrary, strong leaders with strong vision and strong conviction may only cause such rainbow-like coalitions to collapse well before the ground-clearing tasks have been completed. Spokesmen for the people on the move may declare being satisfied (though not necessarily for the right reasons) of neither needing nor having leaders—indeed viewing the leaderless condition of people on the move as a sign of political progress and one of their foremost achievements.

This is not at all surprising. This is what was to be expected in our times dubbed in advance by Antonio Gramsci as an 'interregnum' (the term unduly

and for much too long sank into oblivion, but has fortunately been recently excavated and dusted off thanks to professor Keith Tester): times at which the evidence piles up almost daily that the old, familiar and tested ways of doing things work no longer, while their more efficient replacements are nowhere in sight—or too precocious, volatile, and inchoate to be noticed or to be taken seriously when (if) noted.

We may safely assume that people who in rising numbers take to the streets and settle for weeks or months on end at the improvised shelters pitched on public squares, know—or short of knowing for sure have enough opportunity to guess or suspect—what they are running *from*. They know for sure, or at least they have good reasons to believe that they know, what they would *not* like to go on being done. What they don't know, though, is what needs to be done *instead*? More importantly yet, they have no inkling *who* could prove to be potent and willing enough to do whatever they believe to be the right step to take. Twitters and Facebook messages summon them and send them to public squares to protest against 'what is'—the message-senders however keep mum on the moot question of with what kind of 'ought' that 'is' shall be replaced; or they portray an 'ought' in sufficiently broad, sketchy, vague, and above all 'flexible' outlines to pre-empt any part of it ossifying into a bone of contention. They keep also prudently silent about the thorny issue of the compatibility or incompatibility of their demands. Twitter and Facebook message-senders can neglect such caution only at the peril of the cause they promote. Were they to disregard the iron rules of all effective digital calls-to-arms and all successful from-online-to-offline strategies, they would risk their messages being stillborn or dying without issue: few if any tents would be pitched on public squares in response to their calls, and very few would be holding their initial residents in for long.

Building sites, it seems, are nowadays in the process of being collectively cleared in anticipation of different management of space. People on the move do that job or at least earnestly try. But the future buildings bound to replace the vacated and/or dismantled ones are scattered over a multitude of private drawing boards, none of them having as yet reached the planning permission stage; as a matter of fact, no foundations have been laid as yet under a planning office entitled and trusted to issue such permissions. The site-cleaning powers seem to have grown considerably; the building industry however lags far behind—and the distance between its capacities and the grandiosity of the unattended construction work keeps expanding.

It is the all-too-visible impotence and ineptitude of the extant political machinery that is thus far the principal power that prompts people, in steadily growing numbers, to go and to stay on the move. The integrating capacity of that power is, however, confined to the ground-clearing operation. It does not extend to the designers, architects, and builders of the polis to be erected instead. Our 'interregnum' is marked by the dismantling and discrediting of the institutions servicing heretofore the processes of formation and integration of public visions,

programmes and projects. Having been subjected, together with the rest of the social fabric of human cohabitation, to the processes of thorough deregulation, fragmentation and privatisation, such institutions remain stripped of a large part of their executive capacity and most of their authority and trustworthiness with but a vague chance of their recovery.

Any creation is all but unthinkable unless preceded by, or coterminous with, an act of destruction. Destruction however does not by itself determine the nature of a constructive sequel or even makes its imminence a foregone conclusion. As far as the institutional network of society is concerned, and in particular the vehicles of collective, integrated undertakings, it feels as if 2011 contributed considerably to the volume and capacity of available bulldozers, whereas the production of construction cranes together with the rest of the building equipment plunged that year yet deeper into the already protracted recession, while their existing supplies have been kept idle—put in mothballs in expectation of times more propitious, though alas stubbornly reluctant to arrive.

Leaders of ad hoc coalitions can be only ad hoc leaders. Not an attractive job for people with genuine leadership quality, equipped with more than personal photogenic charm and wheeling-dealing skills, and an appetite for instant, if fragile, notoriety. Each set of external circumstances creates its own set of realistic options for individual choices, but each option appeals to its own category of potential takers. The manifestly impotent politics concerned mainly with keeping their subjects at a safe distance, increasingly run by spin doctors and stage-managers of photo-opportunities, and ever more remote from the grass-roots daily concerns and worries, is hardly a magnet for individuals with visions and projects reaching beyond the next election date—individuals with qualities indispensable for political leaders as distinct from political machine-operators. Potential political leaders have not stopped being born; it is the deteriorating and increasingly decadent and powerless political structures that prevent them from coming of age.

Vladimir Putin, when declaring (in all likelihood prematurely) the defeat of the massive public protest against the haughty contempt with which the Russian powers-that-be treat their electorate, hit the nail on the head when he imputed that alleged failure of the opposition to the absence of a leader capable to put together a programme which the protesters would be willing to accept and able to support. He summed up pretty accurately the current state of experimentation with alternative tools of effective political action to replace the out-dated and ever less potent and more rickety ones. But for how long his diagnosis may remain valid is not for him, nor as a matter of fact for anyone, to determine before the people who make history while being made by it decide—whether by design or by default. In the course of their doing so, the urgent, imperative need, as well as the likelihood of genuine political and spiritual leaders will become more and more evident. And then the prospective leaders would do well to recall and learn from Václav Havel's experience and accomplishment; because even from

among the most outstanding political figures of recent times Havel, as it were, stood out.

Unlike other bona fide political leaders, Havel had at his disposal none of the equipment deemed indispensable for exercising tangible influence. No massive political movement, complete with ramified and well entrenched political machinery. No access to abundant public funds. No army of police to make his word flesh. No mass media to render him a celebrity, to convey his messages to millions, and to make millions eager to listen and to follow. As a matter of fact, Havel had but three weapons to use in his effort to change history: hope, courage, and stubbornness—weapons which all of us possess in one measure or another. The sole difference between Václav Havel and the rest of us is that we, unlike Havel, seldom reach for those weapons; and when (if) we do, we do it with much less—weaker and shorter-lived—determination.

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