

Lady Rawlings, Mr Horacek, Governors, Parents, Teachers, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen ...

Welcome to the prize giving and graduation ceremony 2010 of the English College in Prague.

As I stand here tonight, in the 15th year of the existence of the English College in this elegant building in the centre of Prague, I am struck more than anything else by the improbability of it all – the sheer unlikelihood of our being here. I say this on a personal level

I would have considered mad anyone who told me twenty two years ago, when I first came to this amazing city and sat in the smoke filled rooms of the Café Slavia, sipping my first Becherovka, that just over two decades later I would be here as Headmaster of an English School

But more importantly I say this about the School itself. An English College, with predominantly Czech students, teaching the International Baccalaureat, in a city that, when I was the graduates age was well and truly behind – for me – the iron curtain. And if I have one lesson for the graduates it is do not believe those who, with the benefit of hindsight, declare they saw this coming. I remember very clearly going to a seminar in Cambridge in October 1989 about Romania, then under the de facto dictatorship of Ceaucescu . at that Conference some donnish expert proclaimed that, whatever else happened in central and eastern Europe, Romania would never topple Ceaucescu. Imagine my surprise then, on Christmas day 1989 and just two months later, to be seeing the violent images of the overthrow of Romania's leader and then to hear that same expert tell the BBC that he had been predicting this all along.

This has been a year of anniversaries – some poignant – some to celebrate. We have marked – in our fifteenth year – the twentieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution and welcomed the second visit of our British patron the Prince of Wales. The school year began exactly seventy years from the day German tanks rolled into Poland and of course we had that terrible moment earlier in this term when we paused in silence to note the awful tragedy of that plane crash near Katyn. Throughout the year our focus has been on History, Memory and Tradition and as our graduates move on today they might reflect on all these ideas – as their time at the College now moves into History, as their memories begin to shape their perceptions of what happened here and the Tradition of English education in Prague, going back at least to the 1920s, of which they are now the most recent graduates.

As I reflect on the year I continue to be struck, as I mentioned earlier, by the improbability of it all. Our own Czech patron, President Havel, urged us to believe in the impossible when he said, in that remarkable speech on New Year's day 1990, that **POLITICS IS THE ART OF THE IMPOSSIBLE**. (Get it in Czech) So many things that ought to be impossible that have happened this year – and I don't just mean my desperate attempt to master this most impossible of languages. I think back to the student council elections when a Czech educated in France handed over to a South African, to the wonderful dramatic productions we have seen – just take the first, the Pinter, and note that a Ukrainian student helped by a British teacher directed a cast that included Czechs, Slovaks, Poles and Canadians in an English language

performance lit by a Venezuelan. If you want a real example of the impossible look no further than tonight when the Vietnamese student Wega Wu Wei Jia steps forward to receive her prize for Czech and the Czech Jakub Habarta his prize for English.

But the most improbable thing of all tonight is that our College exists at all. Reading the account of the College's history by Ann Lewis one is struck more than anything else by the fact that we should not have succeeded:

P13 The first news to come back from Prague was discouraging

P14 In London voices were heard questioning whether we were capable of bringing the project to fruition

P14 After lengthy discussion it was decided we would make one last effort to fulfil our original aim

P17 Even now all was not plain sailing.

As we gather here tonight the very fact of our existence is an extraordinary thing and it is thanks to the early vision of some remarkable people that we are. It is appropriate, in this year of History, Memory and Tradition, that we are able to recognise the work of all the governors, and especially those with the College from the start – some of whom are with us tonight – for the work they do – tirelessly and unpaid – to keep the vision alive.

Of course the daily work behind that is sustained by an excellent community of staff who come from all corners of the world and whose work has been so important to the successes of our graduates and prize winners tonight. Over the course of the year I tend to thank them for the individual events and moments – the sporting victories, trips abroad, plays, concerts and debates and so on – but the real strength lies in the daily work they do marking, teaching, coaching, encouraging, caring and cajoling and it is that that we should salute tonight. We are lucky not only to have them, but also that, with one exception, we have managed to keep them all for next year. That exception is Mr Wright. Tony Wright has only been at the College for two years but during that time he has been an excellent teacher of Biology, a thorough and supportive tutor and a great supporter of the extra curricular life of the College – especially encouraging students into the joys of rugby and cricket. It is testament to his commitment to the school that, in his very last week here, he is leading a trip to London for all our Year 1 students. He leaves us to go to Switzerland as Head of Science of Beau Soleil and we wish him well there and hope he will adapt to a country with more goats than Gambrinas, more pistes than pils.

We should remember one other group tonight before I hand over to the important part of the evening. In Ann Lewis' book she also writes that 'the directors in London were all too aware of the risk these new parents were taking, and the responsibility this placed on their shoulders.' Education works best when school and parents work together and perhaps the one group of people in this room tonight who find the occasional most improbable of all are those parents who only 18 or 19 years ago were holding as shrieking babies the graduates who sit before us tonight – the sportsmen and musicians, the actors and philosophers, the scientists and linguists, those like Zuzanna Laskowska who has shown so much care for others this year, or Chhavi Maggu who has epitomised the fight for justice, David Horak who has single

handedly produced the student website and Adriana Leeuwenova for whom we have run out of certificates to present.

So on with reality. It is time to recognise these improbable achievements. It is time to celebrate the art of the impossible