

Biography of Mr. Jan Kavan, President of the 57th Session of the General Assembly

Mr. Jan Kavan, President of the fifty-seventh session of the United Nations General Assembly, brings to the post political skills built on a lifetime of experience, both in the Czech Republic and throughout his 20 years of political exile in the United Kingdom. An advocate of democracy and human rights, he served as the Czech Republic's Deputy Prime Minister for Foreign and Security Policy from 1999 to 2002 and as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998 to 2002. He is currently a Deputy in the Czech Parliament.

While Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Kavan also served as his country's representative to the European Union's Convention on the Future of Europe, holding the posts of Vice-President of the State Security Council, Chairman of the Committee for Intelligence Activities and Executive Vice-Chairman of the Government Committee for European Integration. Between 1996 and 2000, he represented the Czech Social Democratic Party as a Senator in the upper House of Parliament.

An active member of various Czech and international non-governmental organizations, in the 1990s, Mr. Kavan served for six years as Chairman, and later as Vice-Chairman, of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA) in the Czech Republic and for three years as a member of the Executive Council of the International HCA. In 1993, he founded the Policy Centre for the Promotion of Democracy in the Czech Republic, which he still heads.

Mr. Kavan was born in London on 17 October 1946 to an English schoolteacher and a Czech diplomat. His father was recalled in 1950, in the wake of the 1948 communist coup in the then Czechoslovakia, and the family resettled in Prague. Shortly afterwards, his father was arrested on trumped-up treason charges and sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment in the Stalinist trial known as the "Rudolf Slánský Conspiracy". Released four years later, his death in 1960 was a consequence of ill-treatment in prison. He was 46 years old.

Following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Mr. Kavan took part in various forms of passive resistance and other political protest activities against the occupation of his country and was placed on the Communist Party's blacklist of "representatives and exponents of the rightist movement". In the spring of 1969 he was forced to emigrate to the United Kingdom, where he lived in exile for the next twenty years, becoming a member of the British Labour Party. Throughout this period, he assisted Czech opposition activists -- in particular the human rights movement known as Charter 77 -- which led to the loss of his Czechoslovak citizenship in 1979.

On returning to Prague from political exile in November 1989, Mr. Kavan joined the Civic Forum, the principal political movement fighting for democracy in Czechoslovakia during the so-called Velvet Revolution, and was elected to its Coordinating Committee. In the country's first free parliamentary elections in 44 years, he was elected, in June 1990, to the Federal Assembly (Parliament) and became a member of its Foreign Affairs Committee.

Joining the Czech Social Democratic Party in 1993, Mr. Kavan chaired its Foreign Affairs Commission from 1994 to 1998, acting as its foreign affairs spokesman between 1996 and 1998. Mr. Kavan represented his party on the Central and East European Committee of the Socialist International -- a worldwide organization of social democratic and labour parties -- of which he was elected Vice-Chairman in 1997. He was elected to the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Social Democratic Party the same year and re-elected in 1999.

During his early 1970s exile in the United Kingdom, Mr. Kavan founded and ran the Palach Press Agency, which published articles by Czech as well as Central and Eastern European authors living in the West and served as the press agency in the West for the activities of Czech opposition movements.

In the early 1980s, Mr. Kavan formed the Jan Palach Information and Research Trust and the East European Cultural Foundation (EECF). He later helped to found the East European Cultural Endowment Ltd. which, alongside the EECF, worked to publicize the plight of Czech political prisoners as well as the activities of Charter 77 and other opposition groups. Among other activities in support of the underground movement, the organizations raised funds for the Czech samizdat publishing houses and the underground university, which linked expelled professors with expelled students. He also founded and edited the East European Reporter, a quarterly whose honorary editorial board included such well-known East and Central European dissidents as Václav Havel, Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuron.

Mr. Kavan has had a notable academic career, which includes stints as Visiting Professor of Politics and History at Adelphi University (New York) from 1993 to 1994 and Karl Loewenstein Fellow in Politics and Jurisprudence at Amherst College (Massachusetts). He also lectured at universities such as Columbia and Stanford, Wellesley College and the Harvard Center for European Studies, and taught at the London Adult Education Institute for close to 15 years. He holds several honorary degrees, including Honorary Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

A leader of the 1960s student movement in Prague, Mr. Kavan studied journalism at Charles University, going on to study international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Later he studied politics at the University of Reading.

The author of more than 100 articles published in the daily press and specialized periodicals in the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries of Europe, Mr. Kavan has edited two books on the Czech opposition movements and contributed to four others, all published in the United Kingdom and the United States. His recent publications include: "McCarthyism Has a

New Name: Lustration”, Transition to Democracy in Eastern Europe and Russia (Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport, Connecticut, USA, 2002); “Youth Movements and the Velvet Revolution” (co-authored), Communist and Post-Communist Studies Vol.27, No.2, June 1994 (Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford, United Kingdom); “Charter 77 and other Independent Movements”, Debates on the Future of Communism (Foreign Policy Research Institute, Macmillan Academic and Professional Publications, USA,1991); “From Spring to Winter”, Legacy of the Prague Spring, (Freedom House, New York, 1989); and “Czechoslovak Opposition Since 1968”, Part I and Part II, Poland Watch Nos.5 and 7 (Journal of the Poland Watch Center, Washington, D.C.).

Mr. Kavan is the recipient of a number of medals and awards for his contribution to the struggle for human rights and democracy in his country.