Margaret Thatcher's Speech to Czechoslovak Federal Assembly
September 18, 1990

Mr President Havel, Mr Chairman Dubcek, Your Excellencies, Members of the Federal Assembly.

Thank you for your warm welcome and for giving me this opportunity to address the Federal Assembly. I should like to say a few words to you first as an ordinary Member of Parliament.

A free Parliament and the rule of law are at the very heart of what we understand by democracy. We in Britain have had the good fortune to enjoy them for some eight hundred years. Our liberties have grown steadily over the centuries and we are sometimes flattered by being called the Mother of Parliaments.

The history of your Assembly has been different. You have not inherited your freedom, your fight has been to keep it from being extinguished, first by Nazi tyranny and later by communist dictatorship.

There were brief flashes of sunlight—the Prague Spring of 1968 in which you, [Alexander Dubcek] Mr Chairman, played such a memorable role before hope was so cruelly snuffed out. The pictures of that brave venture are etched on our memory and our inability to help remains a burden on the conscience of the free world.

Later, we admired the fearless way in which you, [Vaclav Havel] Mr President, exposed and opposed, through your plays, the deceits and injustices of totalitarian rule, and with your colleagues in Charter 77 fought against overwhelming odds for basic human rights. That fight was long, hard and triumphant. It paved the way for the downfall of communism and oppression and for those few brief weeks last autumn when the people of Czechoslovakia, not relying on help from outside, but by their own unquenchable resolve to be free, at last regained their liberty.

It is with a very great sense of respect that I congratulate you on restoring a free Parliament and on returning your country into the mainstream of Europe's democracies, where you truly belong.

May I also say, as the British Prime Minister, how much it matters to Britain to be able to look once again to Czechoslovakia as a partner and a friend. There is a lot of history between us. President Masaryk used to trace our relationship back to 1382 and the marriage of our King Richard II to Anne of Bohemia.

But even then the links were not only dynastic but practical as well, because in the 1350s it seems that silver-miners came from Bohemia to demonstrate their skills in England—an earlier version, one might say, of the Know-How Fund.

The ties between our philosophers, our historians, our writers, have always been strong, from John Huss and Comenius, to the many Czechoslovak academics and scientists who found a home in British universities during this troubled century.

In the arts, we owe you an enormous debt. To cite one example, the finest record of London as it was before the Great Fire of 1666 is found in the engravings of the celebrated artist, Vaclav Hollar. We admire the music of Dvorák and Janácek and Smetana, with its echoes of the deepest feelings of your country and your people.

In this century the fate of our two nations became even more closely linked. Two great statesmen—Masaryk and Benes—built the foundations of an independent Czechoslovakia while in exile during the First World War in London. Masaryk, who always looked kindly on his adopted home, wrote in his memoirs:

"English culture I hold to be the most progressive and the most humane, not that I think all the English are angels. But in their civilisation, the Anglo-Saxons have expressed humanitarian ideals the most carefully in theory and have practised them in higher degree than other nations."

Mr Chairman, I am afraid we have not always lived up to that tribute. We failed you in 1938 when a disastrous policy of appeasement allowed Hitler to extinguish your independence. Churchill was quick to repudiate the Munich Agreement, but we still remember it with shame.

Fortunately from 1939 on, we followed the advice of President Benes who wrote:

"When the fate of dynasties, regimes, states or nations is at stake, half-measures and compromises have never helped and never will."

Under Churchill we rose up against tyranny and oppression and fought from the very first day of the Second World War until the very last, a war in which many Czechoslovak airmen and soldiers came to Britain and fought valiantly alongside us.

We were honoured and delighted that some of those brave men or their widows were in Britain last week for the Battle of Britain celebrations. And thanks to your revolution, many of them are now honoured in their own country for the first time.

I was also proud to lay a wreath yesterday at the Memorial to some of our forces who fought and gave their lives in your country. Your decision to commemorate that wartime association by re-naming one of the squares in this beautiful town after Winston Churchill will be a lasting memory of our wartime comradeship which we cherish, for it expressed the true spirit of both nations.

It is in that spirit that Britain wants to help you through the difficult period which lies ahead, as you restore free institutions and a free economy to your people.

When your President came to Britain on a very successful visit in March, he said that Czechoslovakia needed ideas, cooperation and investment rather than charity. We can and will provide those things and a start has been made through the know-How Fund.

And I hope my visit will encourage our businessmen to come here and invest. They will have in mind the tremendous reserves of skill and enterprise which made Czechoslovakia in the 1930s one of the great industrial powers of Europe, reserves which will now be harnessed to renew your strength.

But what gives us the greatest pleasure, Mr Chairman, is to see Czechoslovakia, and indeed Poland and Hungary, return once more

to their rightful place in Europe.

In 1948, as he watched the Iron Curtain come down, Winston Churchill spoke of the need for a new unity of Europe from which no nation would be permanently outcast.

We never accepted during the Cold War years that Eastern Europe should be permanently outcast, although none of us, myself included, expected to see the collapse of communism come so swiftly and so dramatically.

Now that the Cold War is dead, and the barriers down, we must not lose time. The momentum which brought your freedom must now be harnessed to the task of reuniting Europe.

This is no time for the European Community to say that it is too concerned with its own development to take the longer view. We must grasp the opportunity which these great events in Eastern Europe give us to build afresh.

We should also pay due tribute to the courage of President Gorbachev, without whose vision these events could not have happened. But victory is not an end, it is a beginning. The first task is to ensure that democracy takes root.

It is not just a matter of establishing Parliamentary institutions, the powers of government must be limited, the rule of law must be firmly established, and people need to become accustomed once more to exercising personal responsibility.

In your celebrated New Year's Address, Mr President, you said, and it could not be put more eloquently:

"The best government in the world, the best Parliament and the best President cannot achieve much on their own and it would be wrong to expect a general remedy from them only. Freedom and democracy include participation and therefore responsibility from us all."

That is the real challenge. And I am sure that Czechoslovakia's people, with their long-established democratic traditions, are well

placed to meet it.

The second essential is the market economy. The lessons we have all learned from experience since the last war is that regulation and central control of an economy do not lead to prosperity. It is ordinary enterprising people, given the freedom to follow their natural instincts in a system where markets are allowed to operate, who make themselves and their country prosperous.

Czechoslovakia has chosen this route and we admire the bold economic reforms which you are undertaking, painful as their short-term consequences may be. But then reform that is effective is usually painful. People will always preserve and endure hardship if they understand that it will lead to a better life. And they see the way people live, the freedom, the prosperity they enjoy, in the countries which practise the economies of liberty. As they see that, they will surely feel that a measure of sacrifice is worthwhile if it brings a better future for their children.

Your friends will help. Last week a team from Britain arrived in Prague to advise on privatisation on the basis of our own experience of its benefits over the last eleven years. We have been pioneers in this field and I can tell you—it works.

But in case you should conclude from this that uniting Europe requires you and the other countries of Eastern Europe to make all the effort while we in Western Europe sit comfortably and wait, let me make clear that it cannot and must not be like that.

A few weeks ago in the United States, I proposed—and I repeat today—that the European Community should declare unequivocally that it is ready to accept all the countries of Eastern Europe as members if they want to join, when their democracies are strong enough and when democracy has taken root. The Association Agreements which we have offered are intermediate steps but there must be the prospect of full—and I mean full, not second-class—membership for all European countries who wish to join us (applause) and just as the Community reached out in the 1970s to strengthen the new democracy in Greece, in Spain and in Portugal by offering them membership, so in the 1990s we should be ready

to open our doors to the countries of Eastern Europe and that means that we for our part must create the sort of Community which you and the others in Eastern and Western Europe truly want to join, a European Community which is fair, which is open, which preserves the diversity and nationhood of each of its members.

No-one can travel in Eastern Europe without experiencing the desire to get away from bureaucracy and central control and without experiencing the strength of national feeling.

There is a very good historical analogy. When, in 1848, plans were being discussed in Frankfurt to unite all German-speaking peoples, the Czech historian, Frantisek Palacky, refused to take part saying: "We Czechs existed before Austria and we shall continue to exist after she has gone!" One could repeat today those words in a slightly different context:

"Czechs and Slovaks existed before Communism and will be there long after it has become a memory!" (prolonged applause and cheers)

The other institution which can help us to unite Europe is the Helsinki Accords. They brought hope to you and gave the West the legal basis on which to insist that Communist governments honour their commitments to human rights. Today, political reform is progressing so fast, that we should strengthen and extend the Helsinki Process first to ensure those rights and second, to enlarge political consultation throughout the whole of Europe, including also the United States and the Soviet Union. A year ago, who would have thought I could stand here and make that statement?

Mr. Chairman, I have made a proposal for a European Magna Carta to be agreed at the Summit in Paris this Autumn. Like its great predecessor in the year 1215, this would be a landmark of freedom from tyranny and a guarantee of fundamental liberties and I hope the proposal will have wide support in Eastern Europe. If we can create a great area of democracy stretching from the West coast of the United States right across to the Soviet Far East, that would give us the best guarantee of all for security because democracies do not go to war with each other! (applause)

The CSCE is the only body which brings together all the European countries as well as the United States and the Soviet Union and we should fashion it into an institution where regular political consultation takes place not only about Europe's problems but those of the wider world as well.

We should also look for permanent sites for the Helsinki institutions. Your offer to host one of them in Prague is welcome and for my part, I should be happy to see it taken up.

I do not see the CSCE as offering a defence for Europe. Security is founded not only on ideals but on the will and the capacity to defend them with adequate military strength and for that we in the West will continue to rely on NATO, which has proved its worth, but that does not mean we have to stand fast on the status quo. The London Summit last June looked ahead to changes in NATO's strategy and force structures and to further far-reaching conventional arms control.

One key objective is this and one that Czechoslovakia knows only too well: it is to prevent any nation having disproportionate military power on our Continent. Limiting the offensive capability of forces in Europe will make it a safer and more stable place for all of us.

Mr. Chairman, my theme has been the need for unity and nothing better illustrates its benefits than the world's response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Czechoslovakia of all countries needs no reminding that nations have to stand up to bullies and do so at once.

In contrast to 1938, the United States, Europe and indeed the wider world, have responded with an impressive display of unity to Saddam Hussein's aggression. The United Nations Security Council has acted swiftly and effectively in the way that its founders intended and the other day, we saw the [George Bush] President of the United States and the the [Mikhail Gorbachev] President of the Soviet Union stand together in Helsinki to demand Iraq's withdrawal and the restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government. In that new willingness to act together lies great hope for future peace, particularly here in Europe.

Mr. Chairman, it is a privilege to be invited to come here and talk to you and I could go on and make many more points but as a parliamentarian, I know very well the virtue of short speeches (applause) so may I put to you one final thought:

Over the past forty years, we have grown accustomed to a divided Europe in which nothing much changed. There was little impetus to think constructively or adventurously about the future of our Continent. Now, all of a sudden, we have an opportunity to do just that but let us do it in a way which is true to Europe's traditions, not according to some abstract intellectual concept.

At the time when the world was divided into great empires—Sung China, the Ottoman Empire, the Mogul Empire—Europe developed the small state, sometimes based on the city, sometimes on the kingdom. While the empires I have referred to imposed a uniform system on all their peoples, it was the diversity of these small states that accounted for Europe's great artistic and intellectual renaissance, its Industrial Revolution, its love of freedom.

Europe's tradition is of the questioning spirit in the arts, the sciences and in politics, not as arid or destructive criticism but always seeking positive answers. That spirit of variety, of love of freedom and justice, of variety rather than monotony, of active debate rather than passive acceptance, is very much part of Czechoslovakia's history—it was there in the year 1618 just as much as 1968 and 1989—so let us preserve our diversity; it is what gives life its colour, its originality and its meaning. Let us be united not by building new bureaucratic empires but by our attachment to democracy and the rule of law, by our desire to preserve Europe's heritage, by our resolve never again to see Europe sundered into two hostile camps.

Mr. President, I have spoken today of a new Magna Carta for Europe. It was our Magna Carta drawn up nearly eight hundred years ago. It dealt with the grievances of the time in a practical way. It gave legal redress for the wrongs of a feudal age, but it was expressed in language which has had its impact on future generations. It put into words the spirit of individual liberty which has influenced our people ever since.

In its thirty-ninth clause, perhaps the most important of all, we find the guarantee of freedom under the law. This is what it said but remember it was nearly eight hundred years ago:

"No free man shall be taken, imprisoned, outlawed, banished or in any way destroyed, nor will we proceed against or prosecute him, except by the lawful judgement of his peers and by the law of the land." (applause)

These words have echoed down the centuries and their constant repetition helped powerfully to shape our national character.

You yourself have said, Mr. President, that Magna Carta was a source of inspiration for Charter 77 and for your long campaign for human rights in Czechoslovakia and so today, I would like to present you and leave with you a facsimile copy of the Magna Carta, to you, Mr. President, in recognition of the role you and many other men and women of fearless spirit and dauntless courage have played in the transformation of your country and through you, to the Czech and Slovak peoples as we welcome you back into the family of free nations, to be held in safe keeping by this Federal Assembly as you, the elected representatives of your people, set about your great task of creating lasting freedom and democracy in your beloved country. Thank you for the honour of addressing you (prolonged applause).