

## **Remarks at IRAP Innovation Workshop, World Roads Congress, Prague.**

**by Saul Billingsley, Executive Director, FIA Foundation**

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It is a great pleasure to close this workshop, and my congratulations to iRAP and all of you for the inspiring work you are doing. I was asked to speak on the power of youth and the road to the Morocco Global Road Safety Ministerial. It is difficult to talk about the power of young people without addressing their rights, and it is impossible to talk about rights in this great city without referencing Václav Havel. So, with apologies to Czech colleagues in the room who will know much more about him than I do I will anyway frame my remarks around the little I do know.

History was made on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1989. At the United Nations in New York the General Assembly approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Actress and activist Audrey Hepburn joined the last great campaigning head of UNICEF, James Grant, to mark the moment. Today, when the post-war building blocks of human rights are being undermined by populists in liberal democracies, let alone the autocracies, it is worth celebrating the significance of governments coming together to protect child rights.

Article 6 of the Convention declares that every child has the inherent right to life and obliges signatories to the Convention to “ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child”. Those of us who work on traffic safety, or air pollution, or the climate emergency, could question how seriously many governments have taken their obligations.

But Article 6 provides us with a legal mandate to demand action and urge progress. As the Youth4ClimateJustice activists are showing with their challenge to the European Court, human rights conventions can be useful tools for advocacy.

Václav Havel was someone who understood this. Charter 77 was a direct challenge to the Czechoslovak government to meet the Helsinki Accords on human rights. And on November 20<sup>th</sup> 1989, as the Child Rights Convention was adopted in New York, here in Prague, as demonstrators filled the streets, Havel and his fellow dissidents launched the Civic Forum which would bring down Communism.

Ten months later, in September 1990, Havel, now President of Czechoslovakia, attended the formal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Speaking at the World Summit for Children, Havel described how he had witnessed a “beautiful revolt of children against the lie that their parents had served”.

He described how parents, at first cautious, became infected by the children's enthusiasm. "The children evoked from their parents their better selves. They convinced them they were lying and forced them to take a stand on the side of truth".

Today's youth are again marching in the streets, again taking a stand against a social system based on a big lie. As Havel pointed out in a 2007 op-ed on climate, the lie we tell ourselves in our societies is that we can continue "cheerfully pursuing our wasteful lifestyles, ignoring the climate threats and postponing a solution."

Of course, we are all comfortable and complicit in this deceit. Our complicity is made easier by the dominance of propaganda from the fossil fuel industry and its wholly owned subsidiaries in politics and the media, telling the lie that either climate change is not real, or that it is real but not caused by human activity.

By the lie that the daily crawl through congestion in car dependent communities is what freedom looks like. A lie increasingly weaponised in the culture wars.

By the lie that we need ever larger, heavier cars. SUVs now account for around half of global sales of new cars. This isn't only driven by consumer choice. It is driven by easy credit pushed like drugs and by a deliberate denial of choice by nihilistic car companies. It is a trend which is terrible for the environment and for road safety.

An example of how addled our moto-normative brains are in these propaganda fumes, how normalized the societal damage caused by the car has become: An SUV can be propelled through a school fence, across a playground and a picnic blanket and kill two eight year olds, and the news story leads on the comforting police advice that "there is no suggestion of terror".

Václav Havel observed that "you can tell the nature of a society by the way drivers behave towards pedestrians". This is not a comment per se on driver behaviour. Havel's point is that people are shaped in their attitudes and actions by the parameters of what a polity permits as acceptable. Vision Zero, that illuminating philosophy spearheaded by Claes Tingvall and his visionary Swedish colleagues, derives from a similar recognition. Havel's loyalty was to the powerless. Unfortunately, most of our politicians, planners, and engineers, including many at this Congress, still lean towards the powerful.

In his seminal 1978 manifesto, *The Power of the Powerless*, Havel not only dismantled the lie on which the communist edifice was built. He also warned against the excessive consumption of the West, and the ecological damage it was causing. He urged a return to balance, to humanity regaining control over the machine. Look at any urban landscape blighted and divided by urban motorways and understand what he meant.

Havel's essay urged the powerless to confront power whenever and however they can. Even a small moral action, he said, can make a difference. For young people, a generation scarred by Covid, concerned for the climate, denied their fair share of public wealth and public space, activism can be a way to exert agency. The FIA Foundation launched our Child Health Initiative to help young people to raise their voice, and to put their issues on the policy agenda. One practical contribution has been supporting IRAP's star rating for schools programme. Another has been to work with child health agencies on the 1.8 billion voices for change campaign.

Two weeks ago, at the UN summit for the sustainable development goals we brought together ministers with dozens of youth activists to make the case for more investment in a range of acute issues affecting young people, including traffic safety. As a result, several countries have made commitments, at Presidential level, to work on improving road safety data and targeting the safety of the school journey.

Next week the first Global Forum for Adolescents will be held, as a worldwide online event, including a plenary session on road safety which will highlight the benefits for broader public health and the climate.

This is all part of our concentrated focus, through advocacy and grantmaking, on persuading governments and mayors, engineers and planners, to reimagine mobility as a system safe for every child and young person. Zoleka Mandela sadly passed away last week, a huge loss to all of us in this community. Some of you may remember the speech she gave at the Brasilia Global Ministerial in 2015, calling on all of us not to make excuses for inaction, excuses for not changing the way things are done, excuses for continuing to live in the lie that is killing so many millions of people.

So, as we look ahead to the Marrakesh Ministerial in Morocco in 2025, there will need to be an accounting for the excuses that still linger.

But also a celebration of what has been achieved, all the great advances we've heard about over the past two days.

As Zoleka said at the last Ministerial in Stockholm, we need a true revolution, a transformation. That change comes from events like this, iRAP's Innovation workshop and all the amazing work and ideas that you are implementing across the world.

But the greatest innovation will be to take a leaf from Vaclav Havel's book: live in truth, expose the lie, and refuse any longer to accept the death, maiming, and misery caused by the fatal imbalance between man and machine. And turn that refusal into policy that shapes a safe system in every country. That's the mission of iRAP, and why we at the FIA Foundation are proud to support its work. That's how we all, at least in the field that we can influence, can help to meet the promise of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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