

## Student Council

*The year  
of the big*

# GROPE

By STEPHEN KIMBER

As you walk through the black door that leads to the Student Council offices on the second floor of the new Dalhousie Student Union Building, a huge poster taking up close to half the bulletin board, glares out at you. A schematic representation of the organizational structure of the Student Union, it appears more like a grotesque monopoly game gone mad. At the bottom of the chart, in danger of toppling completely out of the picture are the words "STUDENT BODY". It is a sad commentary on the 1968-69 Council that this poster represents an alarming reality. Dalhousie's student body usually ended up being at the bottom of the heap in terms of Council priorities.

For Randy Smith's Council this year, it was what might be termed the "year of the big grope", as Council struggled to be relevant, to extract some cogent *raison d'être* from their weekly exercises on rhetoric. They found none. Vacillating between the radicals on the left and the reactionaries on the right, Smith was able to maintain an uneasy ideological ceasefire, but in doing so, he was forced to abrogate any semblance of a real leadership role in the Council. Without direction the Council seemed to flounder unsure of where it was going or even why they were going there.

To Smith the Council represented a plaything, a forum for a personalized brand of power politics of the playground. It was a game he had mastered better than any of his sandbox compatriots. To prevent an anti-CUS faction from gaining the upper hand in last October's debate on that organization Smith aligned himself with the radicals, manipulating the speakers list to put CUS's detractors on the defensive. The telegram fiasco was easily Smith's finest moment as far as power politics was concerned. His failure to send the telegram of condolences to the American people as directed by a Council motion was probably in accord with the wishes of the majority of students but it was a move that was in direct contravention of the union's constitution and Smith knew it. Yet the President was able to disarm his most vociferous opponents by merely coming to the next

Council meeting, hat in hand, with his confession. "I have erred", he told them, "and a motion to advise me that I have erred would be in order". There were no takers, because his apology and invitation to censure were contrived to make even the most unfeeling of those radical bullies stop and think. Yet, in spite of the almost ludicrous aspect of the affair, there was an important precedent set by this action which could serve to hind the interests of Smith's supporters at another time, another place.

But to categorize Smith with easy phrases like "power hungry" and "manipulating" was unfair. Though he enjoyed the Presidency, it was not so much for self-aggrandizement as the ends which he sought to attain. By birth and upbringing, the epitome of the Halifax establishment, Smith nonetheless by temperament found himself siding with the radical stance on many issues. He supported the Vietnam teach-in over the opposition of many moderates, he pressed for better student housing, argued on behalf of student council involvement in the world outside the university, and advocated student membership on the Board of Governors. Though he seemed to get along well with the university's president Dr. Hicks, Smith was not averse to asserting himself as in the case of Lawrence F. Daley's pending appointment to the Board of Governors.

If there was one overriding failure as far as the President was concerned during his term in office, it was the Gazette. He referred to it as his Vietnam, and the analogy was apt for there was something of the Johnsonian posture in Smith's dealing with the paper. Frustrated at every turn, it was a war he could not win. His advisors ranged from the "bomb it into the stone age" approach to the "self-determination for the people" stance of the radicals. Unable to find a middle ground, Smith was even forced to watch as his election pledge to thoroughly investigate the student newspaper crumbled in the dust with the publication of a superficial and time-wasting Gazette Committee report. It was indeed Smith's Vietnam.

Unsure of themselves Council members began to

move into rival camps, with Bell, Pittas, and Offley at one end of the spectrum, and Cowan and Treasurer Smythe at the opposite ideological extreme defending the status quo. For the rest, they were content to wait for the direction that never came from the President.

The radicals spent the year talking about a grass-roots that they never found, principally because they kept looking in the wrong places. Feeling that issues on the Dalhousie campus were not ideologically impressive enough, they turned their attention to less mundane issues like the "114" at Simon Fraser and the striking workers at Goodspeeds. There is no question that these issues are or at least should be relevant to students, but they were easy, ready-made issues which most students knew little about and cared even less. With few exceptions they seemed more concerned with politicizing their cohorts at Council table than in doing anything that would affect or help the students they supposedly represented. By putting priorities on issues which meant nothing to them or their constituents on a gut level, they themselves became irrelevant.

For the Conservatives the entire year was one of fighting the onrush of the radicals, in stemming an irreversible tide. Their attitude was best summed up by Bill Smythe in the Goodspeeds debate "Let's let the other guys worry about themselves," he admonished Council. So rapt in their fight against the Left, they failed to enunciate any positive actions of any kind, and could easily be dismissed as the reactionary element dedicated solely to their continued existence.

Caught between the two extremes, the middle remained a rudderless undisciplined group, washed by the rhetorical waves of the ideological extremes, never quite comprehending what was taking place in the sedate Council rooms. Here was a group that Smith could and did, at times, lead, but he took them nowhere. And that was exactly where Smith, the Left, the Right, and the middle seemed hell-bent on going. They made it.

