

The public trials of Andy MacKay

by Alec Bruce

Dalhousie, like any university, is a small town. And small towns turn to their leaders when the outside world becomes hostile. University presidents must work behind transparent walls, knowing what frightens and what excite people. In crises, they must know how to restore harmony. When, for one reason or another, they neglect their communities' complaints, they invite harsh, sometimes extravagant criticism. In the last three years, Dalhousie's president, Dr. Andrew MacKay, has consistently fallen into this trap.

When MacKay became President and Vice-Chancellor of Atlantic Canada's largest university in 1980, ending Henry Hicks' seventeen-year reign, the Halifax press gushed that Mohammed had finally come to the mountain. *Halifax* magazine (now defunct) predicted that under MacKay's leadership Dalhousie would actually prosper in a decade in which rising costs and declining enrollment threatened to cripple all but the wealthiest Canadian universities.

The key lay with his plan of fiscal responsibility. By curbing Dalhousie's physical growth, MacKay hoped to invest money and energy in programs like continuing education. Because academic development was cheaper than expansion, MacKay's plan seemed to promise that Dalhousie would remain both progressive and financially sound. In his February, 1981 address to convocation, he sounded sure of himself:

"It is easy to measure our growth in buildings, facilities and dollars. It is less easy to do so in terms of the quality of our work...The times are changing for universities in Canada. After a period of rapid and extraordinary expansion, all of us are caught in the vice of inflation on the one hand and limited resources on the other. Yet I am confident universities will continue to survive and flourish."

It was easy to trust MacKay. He had a winning record.

Born in Halifax, the son of a distinguished professor of politi-

cal science, he entered Dalhousie in the late 1940s to study economics. He excelled both academically and athletically. A quarterback on the varsity football team, who also played a mean game of basketball, he won the Climo Trophy for ability, sportsmanship and team spirit in 1949. In law school, he became active in student affairs, and in his graduating year received the student union's highest award for contribution on and off campus.

But school never blinded him to the world outside. "My father encouraged me to do many things," MacKay explains. "He wanted me to take advantage of my opportunities to see Canada." MacKay spent his summers acquiring a common touch by painting houses, baking bread, working in a mine, in a pulp and paper factory, on an experimental farm, and in the forests of British Columbia. "I learned how people think and feel when they work on a production line," he says.

The term began to sour with the discovery of a two million dollar deficit.

After university, MacKay launched into public service and quickly earned a reputation for diligent, creative work. Between 1955 and 1957, he served as Assistant Secretary to the Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects. In 1957, he returned to Dalhousie as a junior professor of law and seven years later in 1964 became Dean of the faculty. By 1974 he was vice-president in charge of Dentistry, Health Professions and Medicine, external relations and reporting, planning and forecasting services and budgets. Between 1978 and 1982 he chaired two commissions on the remunerations of elected provincial officials, and investigated the hiring of British labourers at Glace Bay's heavy water plant.

MacKay's civic contributions were even more impressive. Between 1966 and 1982 he was a director of nine community organizations, including the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, the Nova Scotia Division of the Canadian Red Cross, and the Halifax-Dartmouth United Appeal. In 1967, he wrote the act which created the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission.

Surely, Dalhousie thought, here was an archetype for the '80's. Donald McInnes, Board of Governors chair claimed "MacKay's experience over the past 22 years as a teacher and administrator, and his intimate knowledge of all facets of the university cannot help but be a valuable asset to him...His modest demeanor, calmness and patience are great attributes." Campus groups raved about the MacKay plan to consolidate resources. Faculty and students hoped his sensible approach would keep costs down and academic standards up.

But three years is a long time in the public eye, and MacKay had problems from the very beginning. Within eight months of taking office, his staff uncovered Dalhousie's two million dollar deficit. Seventeen years of previous expansion suddenly came home to roost. Robbie Shaw, vice-president Finance and Administration recalled, "The health of the university was really quite poor when Dr. MacKay became president. It took months to unravel the state of the university's finances. Such poor health was an albatross around the new administration's neck."

MacKay immediately set out to balance Dalhousie's budget. He installed a "financial information system" to enable this staff to keep monthly tabs on the university's revenues and expenditures. Then, with the approval of the Board of Governors, he sold some real estate. But this involved elaborate negotiation, and the capital couldn't be raised soon enough. To protect the university from continuing high interest rates, he restructured the endowment fund, selling part of the bond portion and borrowing the assets at a fixed, earned rate of interest. His most effective measure was an across-the-board cut in the university's base of operations. He reduced Dalhousie's full-time staff and stream-lined all non-academic activities, saving close to three million dollars. At the end of 1982 the university was almost in the black.

Then came crushing news. In August, 1982, the province cut its funding to Dalhousie by nearly 2 million dollars. In a drastic attempt to adjust, MacKay instituted a "restraint and renewal program." This limited the number of faculty appointments, cut some programs, integrated others and put a ceiling on all expenditures. But all of this was too little and too late. MacKay's dream of a balanced budget evaporated. In a memorandum to Dalhousie's Senate in March, 1983 he admitted:

"At least for the short term we will not have sufficient resources



Dr. Andrew MacKay

to do all we would like to, or even maintain with excellence all we are now doing. Thus, the freeing up of internal resources is needed to pursue development priorities, and also to maintain and strengthen the quality of what we choose to continue. Perhaps the clearest message received is that we have passed the point of trying to trim budgets while preserving all our programs."

The academic community was staggered. Many accused government of treating higher education cavalierly, and claimed universities deserved substantial public support. Others reasoned Dalhousie's problems mirrored general economic conditions, and prayed for a worldwide recovery. But still others put the blame squarely on MacKay's shoulders. Yesterday's hero was becoming today's villain.

Faculty claimed MacKay was slow, diffident and unwilling to butt heads with the provincial government. A member of the Dalhousie Faculty Association (DFA) said "We are disappointed, to say the least, in the utter lack of vigor exhibited by the administration on post-secondary education. President MacKay hasn't been aggressive enough. He should deal directly with the cutbacks."

Student groups went farther. They questioned MacKay's commitment to Dalhousie and even suggested he was part of a government conspiracy against higher education. The *Dalhousie Gazette*, the student newspaper on campus, stated "Until MacKay stands up for this university, we can only feel anger when he points to hardships and denies salary increases to faculty. We can only assume he's acting on behalf of government, as a face-saver for the province's financial woes."

Many of the attacks on MacKay were extreme.

During his first year in office, MacKay worked not altogether successfully to stimulate academic growth. With the presidents of St. Mary's and Mount Saint Vincent he worked on a cost-sharing plan to wipe out course and purchasing overlaps. His aim was to free enough resources to enable each institution to pursue different areas of research. "The end result must be the provision of better opportunities for students," MacKay explained. "If there is co-operation then the money provided for higher education will go farther and will ensure a wider range of quality programs." Though cutbacks made the plan untenable, MacKay held his ground.

Throughout 1982, he conducted a campaign for more government support. He worked with provincial ministers, and used Dalhousie's official functions to broadcast the plight of Canadian universities. In an address to convocation he described proposals from Ottawa as "disturbing" and declared that too few federal officials "recognize that proposals simply to reduce funding and commitments will have a disproportionate effect in some provinces."

Despite setbacks, MacKay made some gains. Between 1980 and 1982, he established five academic programs, including an undergraduate course in computing science, a doctoral course in law, and an honours BSc in marine biology. Through his research awards office, he increased external funding from eleven million dollars in 1981 to over twelve million in 1982, ranking Dalhousie third among Canadian universities in outside grants to researchers.

But keeping a university pro-

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