

Afternoon, October 16, 1999

Fall Convocation 1999

President's Remarks

This is the last Convocation of the 1900's. Inevitably such an occasion prompts thoughts both about the past and the future. A university is a particularly apt forum for such reflections since our fundamental purpose is to study and disseminate the wisdom of the past through our curriculum and to push out the frontiers of knowledge for the future through our research efforts. It is most fitting today, then, that we've chosen to celebrate two distinguished individuals whose life's work speaks to both ends of the spectrum of our concerns. This morning, we are honouring Dr. Milton Halem, a distinguished mathematician who serves currently at the US National Aeronautics and Space Agency as Chief of the Earth and Space Data Computing Division and as NASA's Chief Information Officer. This afternoon, we will present an honorary degree to Mr. Bernie Francis, a Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq who has spent many years working with scholars in our region's universities to compile the definitive writing system, grammar and dictionary of his people's language, an essential component for cultural survival. Their joint presence at Dalhousie today symbolizes the link

between the oldest culture extant on the shores of Nova Scotia and the future of our species beyond the limits of our planet. As the century and millenium draw to their close, our capacity to encompass and celebrate both kinds of contributions at Dalhousie speaks dramatically to the vitality of our intellectual tradition and purpose.

As a history professor, I'm acutely conscious of the incredible varieties and contingencies of human experience throughout the globe, variations that make extremely broad generalizations about the past very difficult. And yet, here we stand at the end of the 1900's and the moment seems to beg such reflections. Hesitantly, then, I will venture a few comments couched in the framework of Dalhousie's special role in the grand sweep of history.

Taken whole, our century has been characterized by extraordinary achievements of technical progress and by extremes of human brutality to one another that are each breathtaking in their scope. These two elements, moreover, seem inextricably intertwined. Our brightest dreams of ease and plenty for all co-exist all too comfortably with our darkest nightmares of human deprivation and mass slaughter. The expansion of the global economy based on electricity, automobiles and chemical industries in the first half of the century, and more recently by advances in information technology and biotechnology, have brought prosperity and a standard of living to many literally beyond the wildest imaginings of our great grandparents. It has also uprooted and

overtaken traditional economies around the globe, pushed billions of people into new forms of poverty and created daunting challenges that threaten our planet's delicate ecosystem. As we leap over what we previously thought to be immutable laws of nature regulating and limiting our life cycles, we still seem unable to provide three-quarters of the world's population with clean drinking water. Contradictions, ironies and tensions abound at every turn.

Our politics have been equally contradictory. Ours has been an age of revolution. Old empires (including the one of which we were a part at the start of the century) have withered, and national liberation struggles have produced an extraordinary array of new countries, and new dictators. Hot wars and cold wars alike have claimed the lives of millions. The philosophers of change have given us new ideologies, each promising the end of history and the ultimate realization of our destiny. Such ideas, we know to our shame, ended in the gulag and the concentration camp. Now, images rather than ideas dominate the politics of our own time. Who can forget such pictures of hope as the Berlin Wall coming down and Nelson Mandela walking out of jail. At the same time, who can bear the searing images of refugee camps filled with starving children and the slaughter that former neighbours have wreaked upon one another in every corner of the globe. Our knowledge is great; our wisdom is small.

Through all these events, through hope and despair, Dalhousie University has moved forward, albeit sometimes a bit unsteadily.

At the start of this century Dalhousie was a tiny institution struggling for survival. Even as late as mid-century we were still fairly described as the “little college by the sea” with less than a thousand students. Snug in our safe harbour, we puttered along. It was only in the 1960s with the general explosion in Canadian higher education that Dalhousie began to assume the shape and character of the institution we celebrate today. Increased participation rates, first for men and later in growing numbers for women, led to a huge growth in enrolments. For the first time in its history, the university began to receive substantial sums of money from the provincial government, buoyed by massive federal spending, to fund our programs, increase faculty numbers and expand the number of buildings on campus. Graduate enrolments also surged forward, partly to provide new faculty members to teach the growing undergraduate population, partly to provide new qualifications for an economy growing ever more technically sophisticated. Our professional schools followed suit to take up new economic opportunities and to staff the growing social welfare programs that emerged at the same time. For faculty and students alike, the world was our oyster. Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s boast that the twentieth century would belong to Canada seemed a reasonable prediction.

Unfortunately, the bubble burst in the 1970s and for the past twenty years retrenchment and pressures to rationalize our universities have been common themes in our development. At Dalhousie, steady increases in enrolments were matched by equally steady cuts to grants and the number of faculty. Most recently, just as we were beginning to see light at the end of the

tunnel, we've been told that the light is a Nova Scotia train filled with provincial debt headed straight towards us. In the days ahead, we will have to work hard to avoid a terrible crash. *It has taken forty years to build our very fine university; it would take only a few years to ruin it.* All of this sounds a little gloomy, and perhaps that is inevitably the nature of sustained retrospection. Yet, for all the challenges, Dalhousie has faced the century resolutely and with dignity. Our record of accomplishment is extraordinary and should fill every member of the Dalhousie community with enormous pride. This month we have eliminated the last trace of an accumulated \$40 million debt that has hung over our heads for fifteen years. As you all saw as you entered this auditorium, we're renewing our campus with new buildings. Last year, we approved eighteen new academic programs, several of them unique in Canada. The success of our recent Capital Campaign has enabled us to establish 29 new faculty positions funded or endowed by the generous support of alumni and friends of the university. Our research profile has never been better. I'm not sure that adversity is the only mother of invention, but creativity and innovation flourish at Dalhousie.

At each stage of our development, Dalhousie has always looked outward, taking the world as we found it and grappling with its shortcomings. In the first half of our century, two world wars found Dalhousie students, faculty and staff at the ready. Even though our enrolment in those days was small, international students already found a friendly home and a superior education. During the last fifty years, there has been a constant commitment to share our education and research capacities with

developing countries, helping them, as well as learning from them, about the challenges of change. Dalhousie's recent international projects have attracted more than \$80 million in development grants. A steady and growing stream of international students have found inspiration and ready skills at Dalhousie to take back to their homes, where many of them have served their countries' deepest needs and filled their highest offices. Dalhousie's faculty and students have also been active abroad, working on development and environmental projects, helping to resolve international trade disputes, advising on foreign policy, and providing health care training and direct service in numerous countries.

Closer to home, the Dalhousie community has welcomed its obligations to use its knowledge and facilities to help create a vibrant, equitable and prosperous Nova Scotia. As the Maritimes' major research university and professional school, Dalhousie's impact over time has been profound. For a long time, the leaders of almost every professional field in the region have been Dal alumni. More recently, the leaders of the business community, especially in the most innovative high-tech sectors, have established deep roots in our school. In part, this reflects the dynamic interplay between our faculty's extensive research activities and the development needs of our region. Last year, Dal researchers attracted more than \$51 million of external research support, some of which went to pathbreaking basic research and some to fulfill industrial contracts touching virtually every sector of our economy. In the knowledge economy, it is vital that we sustain the heart of our knowledge

system, the modern university.

As the knowledge economy unfolds, it is also essential that we ensure that all parts of our community have access to higher education unfettered by social or financial barriers. For many years now, Dalhousie has worked hard to open its doors to ~~these~~ ^{all groups} ~~elements~~ with the interest and drive to succeed. Special access programs for historically disadvantaged communities of students, the steady elimination of physical barriers for students with handicaps, increased bursaries and scholarships, campus employment, improved counselling services, all contribute to greater access and success. Two recent statistics should be a source of pride for all supporters of the university: Dalhousie spends more on student financial support than all but one university in Canada, and Dal students enjoy a graduation rate of 90 per cent, the third highest in Canada. Clearly it is critical to ensure access, but it's equally essential to enable success. At Dalhousie, we do both.

A strong society depends on more than a booming economy. The strength of our cultural life and social institutions also require careful attention and constant support. Throughout our history, Dalhousie faculty and grads have played an extremely active role in the arts. Music, drama, creative writing and the fine arts all have a central place in our university, and our graduates have contributed substantially to the exploration and expression of our regional and national identity through their creative efforts. Perhaps it is symbolic of this engagement with our cultural life that this event today takes place in a university

auditorium that also doubles as Halifax's main concert hall.

More broadly, Dalhousie programs contribute directly to the renewal and vitality of our public institutions. To choose only a few examples, our School of Public Administration recently started a new program in cooperation with the Provincial government to upgrade the skills of younger, mid-level public servants through a unique Masters of Public Administration Management program, a project that will play a large role in renewing a public service depleted by years of cuts and early retirements. Already we have received inquiries from the federal government and other provinces to expand our efforts with their staffs. In another corner of the university, our Faculty of Health Professions this year initiated a new professional development program for employees of our Workers Compensation Board, an initiative that has already garnered inquiries from five other provinces. Our Faculty of Computer Science is heading up a similar development opportunity for federal government officials in Ottawa who have requested a customized version of our unique Masters of Electronic Commerce degree. These programs are notable for their innovative approach to educational partnerships with governments and their employees and for their commitment to ensuring the strength of our democracy by enhancing the quality of our public institutions.

In the same spirit Dalhousie is actively engaged in supporting and improving the health care of our population. Direct care by Dalhousie medical specialists is the most obvious manifestation of this effort. But behind the hospital ward and the clinic office

stand a host of activities ranging from special programs for health care administrators, community research programs to improve the way we address women's concerns and improve medical care ⁱⁿ Mi'kmaq ^{communities} reserves, basic research in the medical sciences and numerous health outcome studies, to name but a few of our initiatives. No one needs reminding of the importance of health care on the list of public concerns and it is essential that Dalhousie continue to receive the necessary support to help build a first rate health care system that is available to all and responsive to the need to balance needs and resources.

Through all of these examples, I hope I have conveyed at least an outline of the way our university reaches out to and serves our community through the wide range of our traditional activities. This is as it should be. Across the century, as our society has grown more complex, as the challenges of the world have proven more and more demanding, and sometimes more disturbing, universities like Dalhousie have played a central part in helping our society come to grips with contemporary realities. At the same time, I hope we have provided some of the leadership necessary for dreaming and shaping a better future. That is a heritage which all of our graduates share.

For those of you who are gathered here today for your own graduation, I hope the Dalhousie heritage will also be an inspiration for you. I hope, too, that you have gained wisdom as well as knowledge from your years at Dalhousie, for the next century, your century, will require both in great measure. As our newest grads, you have worked long and hard to arrive at this

point. Your teachers and the Dalhousie community are proud of your accomplishments, as, I'm sure, are your families and friends who join in this celebration. Some of you will leave here for new jobs or further studies and we wish all of you well. Some of you, like the first graduating class in our MBA Financial Services and the first graduates of our Higher Education program for members with our armed services in the Department of National Defence, are already fully engaged in a challenging career, a career in which we hope you will be aided by your studies at Dalhousie. Wherever you go, and whatever you do, I hope all of you will take great pride in your university, an institution, as you have heard today, with deep roots in the past and our eyes fixed firmly on the future. Congratulations and best wishes for success and happiness in your future. Thank you.

Tom Traves

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