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Remembering Howard Clark, Dalhousie's ninth president

Ryan McNutt - August 28, 2024



Howard Clark, President Emeritus, pictured during his time in office. (Photo provided by Dalhousie Archives and Special Collections)

Howard Clark never subscribed to “ivory tower” thinking about universities.

“Dalhousie is a part of the community, is there to serve the community, and really is an integral part of the metro region, of Nova Scotia, of Canada,” he told *Dal Magazine* in 1987, one year into his tenure as Dalhousie University’s ninth president and vice-chancellor.

“...it does that in a number of ways: obviously, through its teaching and research, but in many other ways as well. The whole question of what that relationship is and should be is a very important one. But the belief that we are here primarily as an institution that serves society, I think, is one we have to re-emphasize all the time.”

Dr. Clark, who passed away earlier this month at the age of 94, served as president through nine crucial years in Dalhousie’s

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history. It was a tenure with its share of issues and concerns, as is often the case over a decade of university history: underfunding worries, physical campus challenges, labour relations disagreements. But underneath all that, his era saw a Dalhousie charting a course towards the 21st century, and to a university that would be more global, more interconnected, and more inclusive than ever before.

In a memorial message shared with faculty and staff, current President Kim Brooks put it this way: “Much of the Dalhousie we recognize today begins to take shape under his leadership.”

An accomplished chemist

Dr. Clark was the first Dalhousie president post-1800s to have been born outside of Canada. Growing up in New Zealand, he completed his first three degrees at his hometown University of Auckland in the 1950s before completing a second PhD at the University of Cambridge.

In 1957 he came to Canada to join the faculty at the University of British Columbia, beginning a renowned career as a chemist. Known for his work in organo-metallic, co-ordination and fluorine chemistry, he would consistently hold NSERC grants right through until the mid-point of his Dalhousie presidency, 33 years later.

Over those years, he would relocate to Western University and, subsequently, serve as vice-president academic at Guelph. He would become a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and the Chemical Institute of Canada, the latter of which he would also serve as its president. He published more than 240 academic papers, received two honorary degrees (from University of Victoria and the University of Guelph), and was a member of the National Advisory Board of Science and Technology.

Expanding Dal’s reach and impact

Dr. Clark’s appointment as Dalhousie president was announced in February 1986. He arrived in Halifax that September and, in the years that followed, began to stretch Dalhousie’s reach in some exciting new directions that would prove to have a truly lasting impact.

There was the 1989 *Breaking Barriers* report, for example — a wide-ranging review of Dalhousie’s relationships with African Nova Scotian and Mi’kmaw communities. It aligned with the creation of the Black Student Advising Centre and the Indigenous Blacks & Mi’kmaq Initiative in Law and sparked new efforts and attention

towards the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups in the university. The James R. Robinson Chair in Black Canadian Studies was also established during his presidency.

Read more: [Breaking Barriers, 30 years later](#) (Dal Magazine, Fall 2019)

Dr. Clark also put the environment on the national agenda in higher education and beyond, convening the the Halifax Conference on University Action for Sustainable Development in 1991, and signing the subsequent Halifax Agreement. He was also known for expanding Dal's suite of international partnerships, signing new agreements that pushed Dal's reach onto the global stage.

"Howard pushed Dalhousie's gates open wider than before," said The Honourable George Cooper, speaking at a retirement reception for Dr. Clark in 1995. "More students from all corners of the world, and all segments of our own society, have been able to join us in the pursuit of truth through scholarship."

Dr. Cooper, a Dal alum, donor and board member who would later serve as president of the University of King's College, also called Dr. Clark "a man with a broad and genuine interest in the whole world and all the people in it."

"The right person at the right time"

Bryan Mason served as vice-president finance & administration during Dr. Clark's time as president. He says Dr. Clark deserves credit for his vision of transforming Dalhousie into a forward-looking and dynamic Canadian university.

"Any fair-minded observer who compares the 1986 Dal with the thriving institution it is now will see just how successful he was.

"With his knowledge and experience, his deep understanding of academic principles and excellence, his immense capacity for hard work, his respect for tradition, his ability to rise above harsh and mostly unfair criticism and personal attack, his willingness to take calculated risks, and his openness to new ideas, he was absolutely the right person at the right time for Dalhousie."

Dr. Clark retired from academic life as a Dalhousian, and his views about the importance of higher education remained focused on inclusion and impact on the global stage.

"Universities are not institutions for the elite and privileged, if they ever were in the past," he told graduates of the Class of '97 at

convocation. “They are certain now essential components for success in a global society.”

Individuals with remembrances they wish to share about Dr. Clark are encouraged to email President Kim Brooks at president@dal.ca.

