

Tommy Douglas: The Father of Canadian Health Care

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I. Introduction

The Life and Political Times of Tommy Douglas written by Walter Stewart and published in 2003 is an engaging look at the 81 years that Tommy Douglas spent on this earth. From his illuminating childhood in Scotland and Winnipeg, to his time spent as a pastor in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, to his success in politics, participating in the creation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and its successor, the New Democratic Party and even his 17 years as the Premier of Saskatchewan from 1944 to 1961. The book ends with a brief chapter discussing both the negative and positive challenges that Mr. Douglas' arguably greatest accomplishment, found in Canadian healthcare, has faced since his passing in 1986. Tommy is portrayed as a passionate, but private person, who would seem to care for the greater good of his community, rather than personal prosperity. It was Tommy Douglas' vision for Canadians to enjoy the delicacies of things like healthcare, social security and a pension, without regards to their financial situation or available capital; crown corporations owned by the state that would serve to be a benefit to all, instead of only serving a few. Neither Tommy or the political parties that he was involved with were ever truly successful in the election polls, many of their policies and reforms, like healthcare, were eventually passed, usually due to the pressures of being in a minority government. Canadians, will forever (or at least for the foreseeable future) be in a great debt to Tommy Douglas and his socialist ideals.

Tommy Douglas was born in 1904 to Tom Douglas and Anne Clement in the town of Falkirk, Scotland. Falkirk in the early 1900's was certainly not a flourishing environment, workers had low wages and lived in less than comfortable dwellings. Father Tom, an iron moulder, wanted a better life for him and his family, as Tommy Douglas writes in *The Making of Socialist*, a common dialogue between Tom and affiliates, "'Now, Tom, I Suppose you're going to make the young fellow a moulder,' ... 'Like hell I'll make him a moulder. I'll break his neck if he ever goes near a moulding shop.'" (*The Making Of A Socialist* 28). Clearly, Tommy was not yet old enough to fully comprehend the injustice involved in Falkirk that allowed the proletariat, who work so hard: to receive nothing. This would be the foundation that Tommy would inevitably build his brand of socialism on.

It was Tom's brother, Willie Douglas, who suggested that the family could find more opportunities in Canada, and in 1911 the Douglas' did just that. Tom continued moulding iron, while Tommy's mother Anne was raising a family and volunteering at the All People's Mission, ran by the Methodists. A place Tommy too would find himself volunteering at in the years to come.

When Tommy Douglas was still a young boy living in Scotland, he injured his knee which resulted in osteomyelitis, an infection of the bone or bone marrow, that while in Winnipeg, would come to leave him crippled and soon after hospitalized. It was here that he learned that his leg would likely be amputated. However, through some sort of luck, an orthopedic surgeon saw Tommy's situation and offered to perform surgery and use the operation as a teaching lesson for his medical students. Stewart writes, "At the time, the youngster felt nothing but gratitude, but in later years, he reflected the fundamental unfairness of a system under which any rich patient could have had the services of a surgeon... but he got them only by the coincidence that the physician wanted to make him into a teaching lesson." (Stewart 28) During the 1930's in the midst of the Great Depression, Tommy was working as the preacher at the Calvary Baptist Church in Weyburn, Saskatchewan (I was born here!). Here, he would become an integral part of the community, whether it was his rather exceptional ability of public speaking, and in this case he was preaching the word of the Lord, or his involvement in creating The Unemployed Association, a place where unemployed men could pass time and a place for members of the community to call using a telephone and request work or chores at a price they could afford. It was also during this time, that Mr. Douglas obtained his Master's degree in Sociology at the McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Socialism began to take a very serious role in his life, and as such, he had a very activist role in his community.

Tommy did not believe in something for nothing, as some critics might have suggested otherwise, and he was very clear about this, "He believed in hard work; he believed in earning your way; he believed that outside intervention should help you find work, not make work unnecessary." (Stewart 85). He believed it was the Role of State to allow all people to have the ability to flourish, and that basic needs for all humans, things like food, clean water and good health, the things required before any human can accomplish anything meaningful, was to be provided by, or at least given access to all people and for it to be free or at the very least, affordable.

II. Relevance

The Life and Political Times of Tommy Douglas' relevance to contemporary politics and its usefulness today is seemingly endless. When Tommy Douglas was voted "The Greatest Canadian" in 2004 in the national contest hosted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, it is interesting how little is known or taught about this "Great" individual. Stewart writes, concerning a trip he made to Weyburn, probably during his research of his book, "The young man behind the counter at the Shell station in Weyburn, Saskatchewan, was regretful but adamant. He told me he had no idea where the Calvary Baptist Church might be. He had no idea

who Tommy Douglas might be, either, and when told that he had been the premier of Saskatchewan for seventeen years, was mildly impressed.” (Stewart 83). It would almost seem, that the background of the man who had in hand in so much of the reforms that allows so many Canadians to live the comfortable lives they lead today, would be more interested (or at the very least, aware) of him and his accomplishments (this book was my first real encounter with Mr. Douglas).

Tommy, a socialist, was himself a bit of a nationalist, and it was not for any epistemological ideal usually associated with nationalism, but rather for Canada to be allowed to protect itself against capitalism. Canada is a huge landmass, full of abundant resources that Tommy believed Canada had the right to flourish from. Instead, practices that are still used today, raw material, like oil, wood and steel, are sold and shipped out of Canada by American corporations and then the finished products are sold back into Canada at a loss. Thanks to the competitiveness that capitalism thrives on, Canadians pay the price. Walter Stewart writes, “...the Americans were (and are) buying us out with our own money. In the period from 1957 to 1964, 85 per cent of what showed up on our figures as “U.S. direct investment” in Canadian mining, manufacturing, and petroleum was raised here, mostly by way of reinvested earnings. By 1968, the figure for U.S. investment in out-of-Canada funds was less than 5 per cent. At the same time, Canadian subsidiaries of U.S. firms were sending back more in profits than they received in new capital.” (Stewart 265) Tommy Douglas, as this paper has stated a couple times already, has been a major influence in shaping Canada today. However, if there was one thing that Tommy is and will be appreciated for for many generations to come is without question healthcare. A socialized system for health that would come to allow cancer patients that opportunity to fight the difficult battle ahead of them, that would allow soon to be mothers the blessings and care only a hospital could provide, that would allow the injured farmer to operate on his broken elbow, at no personal cost to them. When money is not the central issue, things, like healthcare, seem so much accessible. However, this is not to say a system payed by the taxpayers has not got its fair share of corruption and abuses. It would seem that human nature is too accommodating to these types of actions for it not to be found in any aspect of socialism, or capitalism for that matter.

It was Saskatchewan, where Tommy Douglas, leader of the CCF party, that socialized medicine, in Canada, began. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation won the election of 1944 mostly due to the lack of tolerance that people no longer had for the Liberal party, but it was a win all the same. Douglas’ number one priority for his government was socialized medicine. However, the process of creating this socialized utopia was no easy process and it was surely not a quick process either. It took so long, that by the time it was instated, Tommy had already left Saskatchewan as premier to become the leader of the federal party, the New Democratic Party in

Ottawa. The program, after many set backs, was finally put into law in 1962, and was so successful it was recommended to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker that Canada should use a similar system nationally, and in 1966 it was introduced as the Medical Care Act, by a Liberal minority government. A common theme when discussing the reforms discussed in this paper are that these proposals will generally be dismissed by majority Liberal or Conservative governments, only to be considered and passed during Liberal or Conservative governments. Which would logically show that these governments really had no interest in these liberalistic proposals and only considered when seats of the House of Commons or staying in power was a matter of reality. The *Life and Political Times of Tommy Douglas*, written by a NDP supporter, does not hide his attitudes towards the Liberal party or the Conservative party. And as the reader can expect, especially if he or she is an aspiring student who values and appreciates both sides of each story, this book does not have any place for him or her. Having said that, it appears that the two main powers of Canada have always been interested in profits far before even considering anything that would benefit the community as a whole.

The book titles one of its final chapters, “His Finest Hour,” referring to his unpopular (at the time) decision to vote against the government to oppose the recently invoked War Measures Act, essentially cutting dismissing Canadian civil liberty, during the October Crisis in 1970. After a small group of radicals from the Front de libération du Québec or FLQ kidnapped two people, British diplomat James Cross and Quebec provincial minister Pierre Laporte with demands that included the release of political prisoners and \$500,000 in gold, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau imposed the act, in hopes of catching those responsible. The NDP was very mixed on the issue, no doubt because of all the pressure placed upon them to support the act, and when asked by David Lewis, a close ally and fellow NDPer, whether it was wise to vote against the act, Tommy said, “I am going to vote against this if I am the only person who does.” (Steward 286). In the end only four members of the NDP voted with the government. Their reasoning was that the government's response was far too extreme, to suspend civil liberties like habeas corpus, to catch the few FLQ members responsible, “The government, I submit, is using a sledgehammer to crack a peanut” (Steward 287), Tommy was quoted during a House of Commons debate.

One of the main reasons for this book's existence, is to inform Canadians, during a time when Medicare was in crisis (this was published in 2003, a year after the Romanow Report, whether or not the battles continue today, I cannot comment on), Walter Stewart would like people to know a little about the man who is much apart of what Medicare is, as pointed out in the author's note. The eighteenth and final chapter, “The Legacy,” is dedicated entirely to the struggles and mismanagement to occur in healthcare since 1986, the year of Tommy's death. It could be suggested that ever since the Liberals put Medicare into law, the Conservatives and Liberals

alike, having been trying to ruin it, and arguably rightly so. The Liberals being center-right and the Conservatives leaning fairly right on the political spectrum, it probably isn't a desire of the State to pursue matter like healthcare or old age pension. Nonetheless, massive cuts in funding, poor spending where money was spent, mismanagement, and well, greed, were both crippling and soiling Medicare's founding principals. The very thing that Tommy Douglas spent so much of his life on, was and is in a crisis and to go with the author's message, profit and good health do not fit nicely in the same sentence.

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

It would be rather difficult to find someone who could not find some useful knowledge from Stewart's highly praised book, *The Life and Political Times of Tommy Douglas*. The people of the United States in particular, whose government have recently passed a bill that pushes towards socialized health, might see through their patriotism and flag pins and be inspired to see what a nation that takes care of itself is capable of doing. I recommend this simply on the basis that it is getting to the point where society, whether from Canada or abroad appears to be forgetting to appreciate what it means to be healthy, and people do not seem to realize that things were not always like this, at least in Canada. On a personal level, after I began reading this book, I quickly became very devoted to it. I lost interest in reading it solely for a mark, the book review was now secondary. I found a hero, someone I could look up to (replacing Tiger Woods) and Mr. Douglas actually changed how I feel towards politicians. He proved to me that politicians did not have to be self-serving, they could actually want what's good for the community as a whole. When I the second last chapter, in regards to his death, I was honestly quite saddened to see his story end. Tommy Douglas and his devotion to the betterment of humanity, well, he has my vote for greatest Canadian.

IV. References:

Stewart, Walter. *The Life and Political Times of Tommy Douglas*. Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2003. Thomas, Lewis H. *The Making of a Socialist: The Recollections of T.C. Douglas*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1984