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Prairie Centre Policy Institute

Commentary

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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**Tommy Douglas, the Man and the Myth**  
**Part 6: Tommy never let ideology get in the way**

*“Surely, the continued policy of allowing the subnormal family to bring into the world large numbers of individuals to fill our jails and our mental institutions, and to live upon public charity, is one of consummate folly.”*

Tommy Douglas master’s thesis, 1932.

One of Tommy’s greatest strengths was to admit he was wrong when presented with convincing evidence to the contrary. This was because he knew the ultimate goal was not the ideology, but to help the underprivileged.

Tommy received a Master of Arts from McMaster University. His thesis was the benefits of eugenics – the science of culling “immoral, nonmoral and subnormal” people from the human race, mostly through sterilization. But when Tommy learned of the atrocities committed by the Nazis during the Second World War, all with the purported purpose of creating a superior race, he changed his mind.

To the chagrin of many of his biographers, Tommy supported the incarceration of the Japanese in World War II, even though this was an affront to civil liberties (and is now viewed from hindsight as a black mark on Canada). Biographer Walter Stewart tells us about one particularly racist letter to which Tommy had replied “I think that what you have said with regard to the Japanese is quite true.” Stewart could only call the response “inexplicable”.

Again, Tommy saw the light and turned into one of the great defenders of civil liberties. His finest hour, to more than one biographer, was his opposition to Pierre Trudeau’s declaration of the War Measures Act during the FLQ crisis in October 1970. He could no longer support putting people in jail without due process. It’s easy in hindsight to see Tommy was right, but it took a lot of guts to do it in real time. I was living in Ottawa then, and remember waking up to the radio playing O Canada. These were dramatic events, and everyone I knew supported Trudeau.

In 1933, Tommy participated in the convention to create the Regina Manifesto, which promised to “eradicate capitalism”. After he became premier in 1944, he found the talk and the walk can be two different things. After watching more than one crown corporation fall to the competition, he was quite happy to trade ideology for the higher tax revenue the capitalists generated. He loved his social programs more than he hated capitalists.

Tommy’s concern for the underprivileged also formulated views where Tommy was consistent. The bottom line was never the ideology; it was always the benefit afforded his people. Many of his views would seem heretical to today’s left-leaning parties:

- Opposing dictatorships: “I recognized then [after a trip to Geneva in 1936] that if you came to a choice between losing freedom of speech, religion, association, thought ... and resorting to force, you’d use force.”

- Support for the war: “I believe that apart from the conscription of men for overseas service, the country should bend every effort towards the successful prosecution of the war.”
- Aboriginals: Biographer Doris Shackleton said “The practical, obvious solution to Douglas (as it was to Trudeau 20 years later) was to do away with the reserves and the degradation that went with ‘wardship’ and integrate the Indians with all speed into Canadian society.”
- User fees: “I want to say that I think there is a value in having every family and every individual make some individual contribution. I think it has psychological value. I think it keeps the public aware of the cost and gives the people a sense of personal responsibility. I would say to the members of this House that even if we could finance the plan without a per capita tax, I personally would strongly advise against it.”

Tommy’s view on health care was always to ensure that everyone had access to quality care. His concern was not for those who could afford it, but those who could not. It was the same with the service providers, be they public or private. It was not who provided the care, but that the care was provided, regardless of the ability to pay.

I believe Tommy would be appalled by today’s health care system. He would admit that it’s not working and it has to change. Just as he found capitalists generated more tax revenue than Crown Corporations, he would not be afraid to experiment with different service provision arrangements that achieved the goal of better health care.

Tommy Douglas was the last person to let an ideology get in the way of providing for the people he cared about. We could learn a lot from him.

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*Fred Smith is an Investment Advisor in Saskatoon and a regular contributor to the policy debate on creating wealth in Saskatchewan. This is the final segment of a six-part series prepared for the Prairie Centre Policy Institute entitled “Tommy Douglas: the Man and the Myth”, which explores the economic legacy of Tommy Douglas. “Where Do We Go From Here?” is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.*