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## The Tommy Douglas I knew

**New Democrats are right to celebrate the legacy of Tommy Douglas. Maybe they should consider adopting it.**

**By Brian Lee Crowley**

OTTAWA—The fastest way to get New Democrats to their feet clapping and cheering is to invoke the name of Tommy Douglas. Any proposal to reform the party's constitution or adopt a change in policy can be brought to a crashing halt by the charge it would break faith with Tommy's legacy to the party. This reflex was on proud display in Vancouver at the federal party's recent convention.

But alas, Tommy, we hardly knew ye, or at least those who call down the former Saskatchewan premier's name in defence of their policy hardly seem to know whom they are talking about. For if the NDP were truly the party of T.C. Douglas, it would be a different animal today.

How many today recall, for example, that Tommy was a Baptist preacher first, an exponent of the social gospel, before he was a politician? And that his Christian beliefs deeply influenced his politics?

When he came to power he created Saskatchewan's first social welfare department, which many New Democrats believe links the modern right-to-welfare state to Tommy's legacy. Not a bit of it. Tommy wanted no one under any illusion; he fervently believed that humanity lived in a fallen state, that everything was not determined by "society," or your environment, but that in every human being a struggle went on between our higher and lower nature. It was not the job of the state to indulge, for example, the human tendency to want something for nothing, to live off the efforts of others: "We were not interested in paying able-bodied merely because they were unable to work," he said. That would damage people's character. Quaint, eh?

In fact, according to his biographer, Walter Stewart, Douglas had no problem paying benefits to those too old or disabled to work. But everyone else, "would be put to work clearing roads, fencing pastures, installing phone lines, or working in community pastures—what is today called 'workfare' and is roundly condemned by every respectable left-winger."

Then there are public finances. While the federal NDP has made some progress, there were few provincial governments more profligate with tax dollars and more heedless of borrowing than Bob Rae's NDP government in Ontario. The federal NDP was one of the last apologists for the

deficit in the '90s and one of the loudest voices calling for a return to deficit financing in the face of the recent recession.

Tommy was of a different view, influenced again by his roots in the same Scottish Protestantism that gave us Adam Smith. He believed that if you borrowed money to run your government that the bankers called the shots, whereas when you paid your own way, you were master of your fate. As premier of Saskatchewan he presided over an unbroken string of 16 balanced budgets, including during the economic slowdown of the Diefenbaker years.

When I worked on the Hill in the mid-seventies, first as a Parliamentary intern for NDP MP Father Andy Hogan and then as an assistant to New Democrat Andy Brewin, Tommy was still MP for Nanaimo-Cowichan-The Islands. We became friendly and Tommy and I used to talk about the issues of the day whenever we could steal a few moments.

Imagine my surprise when he told me how disturbed he was at the direction that medicare had taken since the days when he laid that program's foundations in Saskatchewan. He had never intended, he told me, that the taxpayer be obliged to pay for every hang nail.

His object was that no one should be ruined financially due to serious illness, a completely different proposition. As premier, he spoke in the Saskatchewan Legislature about how terribly important it was that every individual be expected to make some direct financial contribution to the cost of their own health care—a policy that is anathema to the party that today cheers his name to the skies.

Tommy was a great egalitarian and one of his greatest pleasures was reciting the Scottish bard Robbie Burns's denunciation of unearned privilege while celebrating our shared humanity: *A prince can make a belted knight,*

*A marquis, duke, an a' that!*

*But an honest man's aboon his might -*

*Guid faith, he mauna fa' that!*

*For a' that, an a' that,*

*Their dignities, an a' that,*

*The pith o sense an pride o worth,*

*Are higher rank than a' that.*

Yet one of the NDP's great challenges is to shake the charge that it has become the party of privilege, of every organized interest group that wants the state to give them some unearned

benefit at taxpayer expense, including those aristocrats of the labour movement, the public sector unions.

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