Tommy Douglas: Eugenicist

Written by Tristan Bronca on October 18, 2016 for The Medical Post

A look back at the master's thesis that tarnished the legacy of the most important figure in Canadian health care

Tommy Douglas, the founder of Canadian medicare and the man named the CBC’s greatest Canadian of all time, has one very dark stain on his otherwise sterling reputation.

In 1933, Douglas wrote his master's thesis on what he called “the subnormal family.” By “subnormal” he meant the morally degenerate and mentally deficient. These were the bad apples, and in Douglas’s small town of Weyburn, Sask., they were spoiling the bushel.

To make his point, Douglas traced the lineage of 12 “subnormal” women down to their 200 descendants. He showed what their expanding numbers cost the taxpayer (a lot) and harped on their “dirty” and “careless” character. For Douglas, these people were not only a burden to society, but also a very real danger.

“It is surely the duty of the state to meet this problem,” Douglas wrote. He suggested vetting the mental and
physical health of couples before handing out marriage licences, segregation ("society does not hesitate to segregate criminals, lepers or any others that threaten the well-being of society"), and sterilization (it “would deprive them of nothing that they value very highly”).

Whatever your sensibilities, it is a baffling document, and depending on who you talk to, it cast a shadow over Douglas’s later achievements.

In unpublished comments from a recent interview, Dr. Brian Day, the face of the battle to legalize private health care in Canada, was asked what Douglas might think about the state of Canadian health care in 2016. He mentioned the thesis and gently suggested that perhaps a eugenicist doesn’t belong in conversations about Canadians like Terry Fox, Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Sir Frederick Banting.

But this is where Douglas deserves to be defended. Today we read his thesis through the lens of history, after the Nazi’s genocidal policies forever warped eugenics into a grotesque social experiment. Douglas himself recognized this change long before most others did. When he visited Germany in 1936 as an ambassador for the World Youth Congress, he attended one of Adolf Hitler’s rallies. There he experienced a “frightful” epiphany that led him to reject his earlier beliefs. When he took public office as the premier of Saskatchewan in 1944, he resisted pressures to implement a eugenics program. While the premiers in B.C. and Alberta and the governors of 24 U.S. states passed laws mandating sterilization, Douglas brought in programs to provide therapies and vocational training for the people he once labelled “subnormal.”

It’s tempting to revert to simple categorizations of historical figures. But our heroes and villains are often too complicated for that. Douglas warrants both our admiration and criticism—not just whichever one is in our political interest. MP