T.C. 'Tommy' Douglas
1904-1986

In a CBC contest early in 2005 Tommy Douglas was voted by
Canadians as the "Greatest Canadian". Douglas devoted his
total life to the values of social
democracy and justice.

Thomas Clement Douglas was
born in Falkirk, Scotland, and
emigrated to Canada with his
family in 1910, settling in
Winnipeg. The family returned
to Scotland during World War
I, returning to Winnipeg at
war's end. Tommy attended
Brandon College and became a
Baptist minister in 1930. He
went on to complete by mail an
M.A. in sociology at McMaster
University (1933).

He was influenced by the social
gospel movement of J.S. Wood-
sworth and became interested
in social reform and progres-
sive politics through his stud-
ies. In 1930 Douglas became
minister at the Calvary Church
in Weyburn, Saskatchewan,
where the miseries of the
Depression and the Prairie
dustbowl confirmed his social
activism. Though he had mar-
rried Irma Dempsey in 1930 and
their daughter Shirley was born
in 1934, he resigned his living to contest the Saskatchewan election in 1934. He had joined the new Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and in the 1935 federal election he was elected as the CCF member for Weyburn.

In 1942 Douglas became leader of the Saskatchewan CCF and then won the June 1944 provincial election to become premier. His CCF government, which won five straight victories, brought in socially progressive legislation that created the publicly owned Saskatchewan Power Corporation, and publicly owned automobile insurance, and legislation providing for the unionization of the public service. It also created the first program in Canada of free and universal hospital care (1947), as well as establishing the Saskatchewan Bill of Rights some 18 months ahead of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

Inspired by Saskatchewan’s lead in introducing a universal medicare program in 1961, the federal Liberal government first introduced universal hospital insurance legislation and then universal medicare for all of Canada in 1966. By then Tommy Douglas had, somewhat reluctantly, taken the leadership of the federal New Democratic Party, formed when the CCF allied with the labour movement. He led it to maturity and strength as the established third party before retiring from politics in 1971.

In 1981 Douglas was made a Companion of the Order of Canada and a Privy Councillor in 1984. He was inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame in 1981. He died in Ottawa in 1986 at the age of 81.