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| **Reading: Telling Life Stories**  Telling a life story is also called a biography. A biography starts with why the writer or speaker thinks the person is important. It then takes the reader or listener through the person’s life events chronologically. Finally, it summarizes the impact of those different life events on the people around the person or the community. |

Tommy Douglas: The Father of Universal Health Care

What is the difference between Canada and the United States? One difference is universal health care, which is the idea that everyone, regardless of their financial circumstances, is entitled to quality health care. This difference is due to the vision, persistence and hard work of one man---Tommy Douglas.

Thomas Clement Douglas, known as Tommy Douglas, was a social policy innovator who championed the rights of all Canadians regardless of background, class, welfare or circumstance. A man ahead of his time, Douglas ensured that all Canadians were guaranteed social welfare, health care, old age pensions and mothers' allowances. He was a radical whose ideas have since become the foundation of Canadian society.

Douglas was born in Scotland in 1904. His family immigrated to Canada in 1910, but returned to Scotland in 1914. They returned to Canada again after World War I and Douglas spent his formative years in Winnipeg, Manitoba. As immigrants who had to endure tremendous hardships, the Douglas family politics were oriented toward socialism. These ideals were strengthened when Douglas was hospitalized at the age of ten for a bone disease. His family did not have enough money to pay for a specialist. His parents were told that their son's leg would have to be amputated in order to prevent the disease from spreading throughout his body. However, fate intervened. A visiting surgeon offered to operate on Douglas for free, as long as the doctor’s students were allowed to watch the surgery. The operation saved Douglas's leg. This incident served as an inspiration for Douglas’ dream of universal medical care.

As a young man, Douglas was interested in philosophy, politics and debating. He also took up boxing and was twice the light heavy weight champion of Manitoba. His skill as a fighter would later prove useful when arguing and defending his political causes. Douglas also enrolled in public speaking courses, and eventually became a lay preacher. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Brandon College in 1930 and was ordained as a Baptist minister. He soon entered politics to act upon both his spiritual faith and his social and political convictions.

In 1933, Douglas received his Masters of Arts in sociology. The following year, he ran in the provincial elections but lost. It was a terrible blow to his confidence. He vowed never to run for political office again. Instead, he decided to go back to school, work on his Ph.D. and work for his church. However, his church congregation encouraged him to run for political office again, believing in both his ideas and him.

In 1935, Douglas was elected to the Canadian parliament. While in Ottawa, he championed the rights of farmers and the poor. He confronted a government that considered the prairies and farmers to be unimportant. This lack of concern by the government incensed Douglas. He felt that most of Ottawa’s concerns were trivial and irrelevant. He was convinced that the government was unconcerned with the average, hard-working Canadian.

Douglas’ time in parliament coincided with North America’s Great Depression, in which millions and millions of people throughout North America lost jobs, were unable to make a living and struggled just to survive. Douglas’s primary objective was to get people working so they had enough food and clothing. Douglas wanted Canada to ensure everyone a job. He soon became known as a man concerned about every Canadian, rich or poor. He pushed to have everyone treated equally.

In 1944, Douglas moved into provincial politics. He successfully ran for the premiership of Saskatchewan. He would hold this position for 17 years, until 1961. Douglas achieved many successes as the premier of Saskatchewan. He established schools, gave more civil rights to indigenous people and expanded welfare benefits to mothers and children. None of Douglas’ initiatives was more controversial than free health care for all the citizens of Saskatchewan. In 1961, the Saskatchewan Medical Care Insurance Act was made law. Free health care, including treatment for cancer, tuberculosis, polio, venereal disease, and mental illness was guaranteed for all citizens. When finally accepted nationally, Douglas’ universal health care plan separated Canada from other countries. It continues to be one of this country’s greatest attributes.

Douglas continued to promote his socialist policy throughout the 1960’s. Although he never managed to be elected Prime Minister, Douglas was an instrumental player in national politics, as the leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP). In 1979, Douglas retired from politics. His legacy as a social policy innovator, lived on, however. His accomplishments in social policy have defined Canada. Social welfare, universal Medicare, old age pensions, tolerance and uncommon appreciation for the poor and needy form the fabric of Canadian society. Once considered a radical, Douglas has earned the adulation and love of most Canadians. In 1981, Douglas was made a Companion of the [Order of Canada](http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery;jsessionid=18vkvth9vgut3?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=Order+of+Canada&gwp=8&curtab=2222_1&sbid=lc02a). He died of [cancer](http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery;jsessionid=18vkvth9vgut3?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=Cancer&gwp=8&curtab=2222_1&sbid=lc02a) in [1986](http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery;jsessionid=18vkvth9vgut3?method=4&dsid=2222&dekey=1986&gwp=8&curtab=2222_1&sbid=lc02a) at the age of 81. So, who is Tommy Douglas? He created the foundation of Canada as it is today.

*A. Complete the activities below based on the reading on the previous pages.*

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| Why is Tommy Douglas an important figure in Canada? |

Construct a timeline of the events and accomplishments in Tommy Douglas’ life.

1904 1944

1944 1986

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| What was the impact of Tommy Douglas’ accomplishments on Canada? |