

Shirley Douglas Rouses PEI Audience with Powerful Speech on Health Care

by Joel MEGGS

Shirley Douglas is from another era, an era in which oratory was a skill that could incite change. When Douglas appeared on PEI, on March 12th, to give a speech to a crowd of near a hundred people, her booming voice, her infectious outrage/enthusiasm, and her common sense brought the crowd to its feet. Douglas is a woman who obviously shares amazing rhetorical skills and a passion for health care with her father, Tommy Douglas, the grandfather of Canada's universal healthcare system.

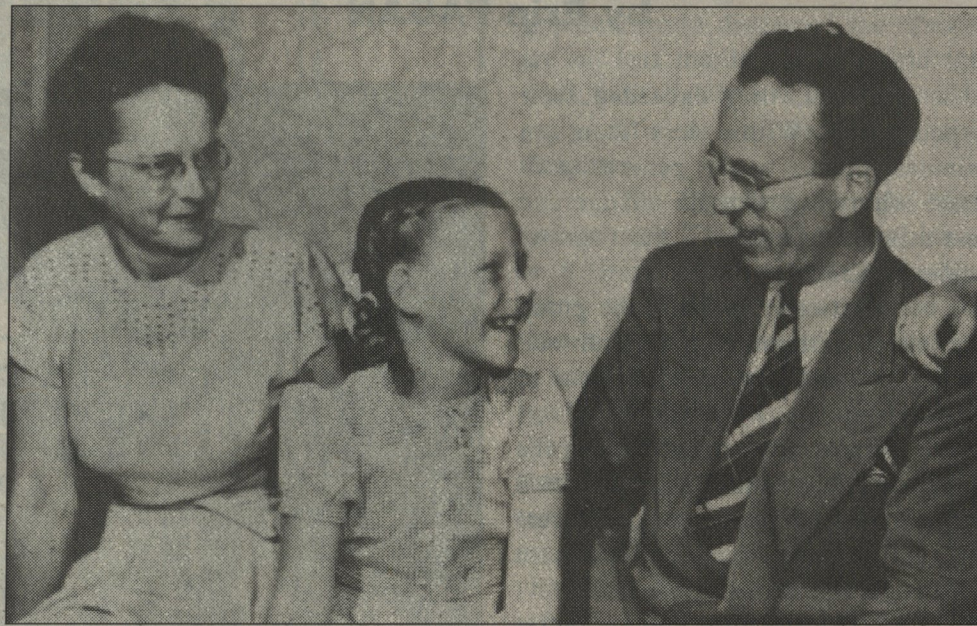
When the crowd left, they were charged up. Everyone was infected by her electrical performance and ready to do her will—that is, to send letters, e-mails, faxes, and phone calls to our elected officials saying we don't want two-tier health care.

This was the crux of her speech. Douglas began by relating how difficult it was for her father to get universal health care instituted in the first place in the thirties and forties. She told of how the Ku Klux Klan would attend rallies held by her father, and that her father needed protection. It was a hard fight to bring socialized health to this country, according to Douglas, and the fight to keep it is going to be just as hard fought.

"The same people that did not want health care in 1944, again in the doctors' strike of 1962, are the very same people that are trying again to take it back: those same insurance companies, those same large major health care companies. Those are the companies that have convinced people like Ralph Klein and Mike Harris."

She mentioned Alberta a great deal, railing against Bill 11, which allows private, for-profit clinics to operate within the province.

Other topics that Douglas hit upon were the nursing shortage in Ontario (for which she places the blame squarely at the feet of Premier Harris), home care, pharmacare, and the deplorable state of health care in



Shirley Douglas in 1948 with mother Irma, father Tommy, and Thing.

the United States, which she warned was the model we were headed toward with the adoption of legislation like Bill 11.

She encouraged all to see the movie *John Q*, in which a man with health insurance from an HMO needs an operation for his son but can't get it because of the tyranny of these for-profit health insurance providers.

At times, Douglas was incensed by the subject matter she raised. Case in point, she mentioned how Sunnybrook hospital in Toronto now allows a private health care provider to operate within its walls, using public facilities, but hiring doctors and nurses privately and charging exorbitant fees (which, for the time being, are absorbed by the province).

Shirley Douglas' central message was that no one should be taking the current state of health care in Canada lightly.

"These are the people," Ms. Douglas said, motioning to the audience, "you and I, who will decide what happens to our country and will decide what is going to happen the health system in this country."

She said that she often hears people say resignedly, "Perhaps the healthcare system is too expensive;

perhaps it is time to go."

"Somehow we have bought in to the ridiculousness of the phrase, 'We have no money.' WE HAVE MONEY!" Ms. Douglas bellowed to a noisy round of hoots and applause.

"We have never had so much money in Canada in the history of the entire country. This is the richest period we have ever seen. If we can't do anything now, I hate to see when the bust comes, what we are going to do. These are the boom years when we could have been building, so when things go wrong, as they invariably do, we would have been ready for it. . . We've squandered the money, we've wasted the money, and most places we have no policy."

She chalks much of the crisis in the healthcare system up to poor political management. She cited instances where, in the hands of impartial experts, costs could be kept down substantially while still providing a more-than-adequate degree of quality care.

Douglas said that "the crisis" was a result of political spin-doctors who, pressured by private lobbyists, have caved to pressure and want to introduce some degree of profit into the system to appease political donors.

"The possibility of the money that can be made is enormous. [The private, for-profit health care providers] are very honest when they say 'There is an \$82 billion golden egg in Canada, and we want it.' I don't mind them saying they want it, but I resent enormously the politicians in this country who are willing to give it away," Douglas cried, to wild applause.

Douglas ended the evening on an optimistic note, crediting activists like CUPE with getting the word out that Canadians don't want private companies dabbling in our healthcare system.

"Eighty percent and more of the Canadian public say ... 'what we want is what we had: a one-tier publicly funded health care system, and it's [the politicians'] job to get it!"

She even suggested that the mood in the United States is such that it won't be long before America adopts universal healthcare:

"[The Americans] are so mad down there, but they are taking it in their hands and believe me, within ten years they will have a public health system."

Douglas said she was encouraged by Roy Romano's commission on healthcare, but reiterated that it is imperative that Canadians' voices be heard, and stated emphatically that *everyone* needs to contact their elected representatives over this vital issue.

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