



Justice Emmett Hall

The campaign to establish public health care in Canada will forever be associated with the name of Tommy Douglas, Premier of Saskatchewan, who introduced Canada's first provincial government-funded health insurance in 1947. When the federal government deliberated another great extension of health care for Canadians, Supreme Court Justice Emmett Hall championed the cause with a ringing endorsement.

The clarity and compassion of his defense of medicare deserve to be remembered:

As a society, [we] are aware that the trauma of illness, the pain of surgery, the slow decline to death, are burdens enough for the human being to bear without the added burden of medical or hospital bills penalizing the patient at the moment of vulnerability. The Canadian people determined that they should band together to pay medical bills and hospital bills when they were well and income earning. Health services [are] a fundamental need, like education, which Canadians could meet collectively and pay for through taxes.

Born to a poor Irish family near Montreal in 1898, Justice Hall studied law in Saskatchewan and served as Chief Justice of the province (appeal division) before his appointment to the Supreme Court in 1962. In 1961 at the request of the Diefenbaker government, Justice Hall led the Royal Commission on Health Services interviewing hundreds of witnesses and bringing attention to needs of ordinary men and women living with illness or injury.

Asked in 1965 by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson whether Tommy Douglas' Saskatchewan experiment could work nationwide Justice Hall responded, "most definitely". The National Medical Care Insurance Act was passed on December 8, 1966 by an overwhelming vote of 177 to 2, with a starting date of July 1, 1968

Justice Hall lived to 96 and was active in defending the rights of indigenous people and persons with disabilities. Described as "an establishment radical," Justice Hall understood power and the intricacies of politics but repeatedly sided with the common man and the needs of the poor. Challenged by opponents who believed expanded health care was too expensive Justice Hall responded, "The only thing more expensive than good health care is no health care." We remember Justice Hall today as a father of medicare whose work helped form our national identity.

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